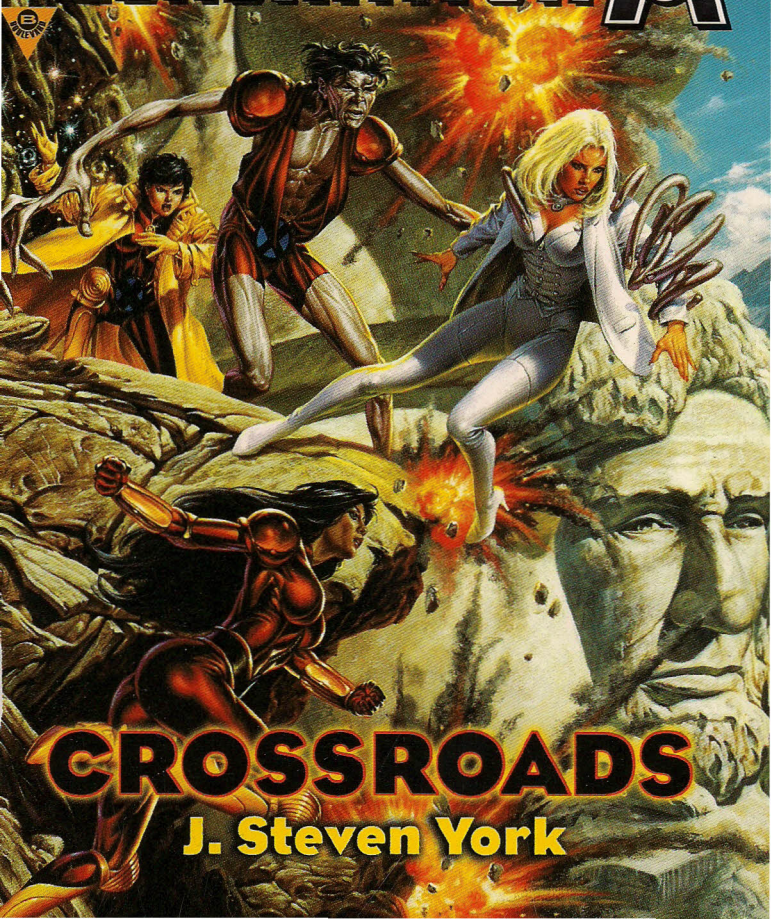


THE MUTANT TEENS FACE TERROR ON THE ROAD!

GENERATION X



CROSSROADS

J. Steven York

GENERATION X[®]

CROSSROADS

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY
MARK BUCKINGHAM



BYRON PREISS MULTIMEDIA COMPANY, INC.

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CHAPTER ONE



“Panic in the Midwest today amid numerous unconfirmed sightings of the mutant terrorist Magneto near Dayton, Ohio, and Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. This despite assurances from military intelligence officials that Magneto is not in the area. These officials suggest that a ‘costumed prankster’ could be the cause of the mayhem, but public skepticism abounds. Armed mobs are now patrolling some Dayton neighborhoods, and at least two homes where mutants are reported to live have burned under suspicious circumstances. We’ll have a live report later in the hour.”

—excerpt from WNN news broadcast

Sean Cassidy held the controls of the Frost Enterprises business jet in his steady hands, and gently guided it through a turn. He watched the compass, leveling the plane on a heading that would take them into U.S. airspace and across the coast of Washington state. "Sweet little one, this is," he said to the pilot, who had been closely observing his maneuver.

"Not bad," he said.

"Ye gonna let me land her?"

"We'll see."

Emma Frost leaned over between the seats. "Well, be sure to let me know, so I can assume the crash position."

Sean glanced back at her and smiled. "Oh, ye of little faith. I'll set yer precious jet down in one piece."

"I can buy another jet," she said drolly, "it's precious me that I'm worried about. Anyway, you were telling me about the origins of this side trip of ours. Or shall I just pluck it telepathically directly from your brain?"

Sean held up his hand. "Nah, nah, there'll be none of that. As I said, it was Charles's idea. For years he's been wanting to set up an organized underground support network for mutants and mutant advocates. He's taken tentative steps in that direction in the past, but now he wants to solidify his contacts across the country and take it a step further. We're laying the groundwork for something he calls the Mutant Underground Support Engine, MUSE for short."

Emma laughed softly. "Imagine that. Charles Xavier sending me as a goodwill ambassador for his cause."

Sean focused on his controls. The general public knew that Charles Xavier—the founder of the Xavier Institute for Higher Learning—was a world-renowned geneticist and mutant-rights advocate. What they didn't know was that Xavier was a mutant himself, a telepath, and the founder of the mutant super hero team known as the X-Men. He had entrusted Sean and Emma with the running of the Institute's sister school, Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, where they trained young mutants.

In response to Emma's words, Sean said, "Charles has always been one to believe that people can change, given the chance."

"And do you believe that, Sean?" Both she and Sean had things in their past to atone for.

"The Professor has the forgiveness of a saint, but as for me, well, I know about me, and most days I'm pretty sure about you. As for the rest of the lot, well . . ."

She chuckled.

"So," he said, "are you okay with this side trip?"

"Well, it is the beginning of summer, the school dorms are still undergoing renovation, and we could all use a break. Of course, I have no intention of squatting around some campfire like a savage."

"I wouldn't think of it, lass. You make whatever arrangements you want."

She sighed. "Hand me the air phone and I'll warm up my credit card."

Jubilation Lee was deep in her own personal world, like a dolphin diving for salmon, totally focused on her goal and plunging deeper by the moment. In her hands, the alien-built Danger-boy video game glowed, surround sound beamed directly into her inner ear, tiny figures moving across its Shi'ar-built holostage with uncanny realism. One of those figures was the savage mutant some people called Wolverine.

Jubilee, on the other hand, called him Logan, or Wolvie, or even Fuzzy in an occasional weak moment. They had once been partners in adventure. He had been her friend, mentor, the closest thing she had to a father, and just at this moment, she held his life in the palm of her hand.

As her fingers slid across the control pads, the tiny Wolverine moved in response, weaving across a battle-torn landscape like a hound on the scent. Dancing graphs floating in the air over his head simulated the responses of his superhuman senses. The prey was close.

Then something scuttled into view. Something big, toothy, insectlike, so dangerous looking even at this small scale that she almost jerked her hand away from it. The Brood Queen, one of the hostile aliens the X-Men had nicknamed the Sleazoids. She hadn't expected this at all. The mutant villain she'd been pursuing had been acting strangely, but she'd never guessed that the target had been possessed by the Brood.

The Queen charged, wings buzzing, teeth slashing, spikelike

forelegs stabbing. Jubilee's fingers danced, responding to multiple threats, the tiny Wolverine ducked and slashed. She didn't see the stinging tail until it was too late. . . .

She flinched her eyes away as the decisive blow sought Logan's heart, but the scene froze just short of the deadly impact. The words SIMULATION OVER floated over the tiny holostage, and a critique of her combat strategy droned in her ear.

She hit the MUTE button, and shivered as she came back to reality. She looked at the Danger-boy with disgust, tossed it into the empty seat next to her, and glanced around the small but plushly appointed cabin of the corporate jet. She was startled to find herself seemingly the only one of the students still awake. She must have been playing for hours.

She sighed and slumped in her seat. *If only I could concentrate on important stuff the way I do a video game*, she thought. Unfortunately, concentration usually eluded her when it came to schoolwork, study, friendships, and the use of her own still largely untested mutant abilities. And for someone who possessed the genetic "x-factor," the mutation that gave a small minority of humans strange powers and abilities, lack of concentration could be fatal.

That was why she no longer travelled with Logan, why she no longer hung with the X-Men, why she had enrolled in Xavier's School. Though she had seen and done and experienced things far beyond her years, she had finally admitted to herself that she wasn't ready, that she was a potential danger to herself and those around her. She needed practice, better control of her pyrokinetic fireworks, and, God help her for admitting it, she needed education if she was ever to run with the Big Dogs again.

She glanced around the cabin at her fellow students. Sprawled across two seats behind her like an old gray coat was Angelo Spinoza, a reluctant tough from the Los Angeles barrio who had only partial control of his endlessly stretchable skin—hence his straightforward codename of Skin. In the seat in front of her, book lying open and forgotten in her lap, was Paige Guthrie, country girl, a mutant metamorph called Husk, who dreamed of one day leading the X-Men. Next to her was Monet, Jubilee's constant nemesis, tall, beautiful, powerful; Jubilee sometimes joked that her teammate—whose codename

was simply M—had the mutant ability to be perfect. Monet looked nonthreatening, almost childlike, when she slept. Unfortunately, Jubilee had never been able to figure out how to keep her that way.

Sitting in the front of the cabin by himself was Jonothan Starsmore, aka Jono, aka Chamber, oldest of the clan, brooding and reclusive—not surprising, since the first manifestation of the powerful psionic energies that boiled within him had blown away the lower half of his face and opened a gaping hole in his chest. Actually, she wasn't sure that he was sleeping, or even if he could still sleep. His transformed body no longer needed food, water, or air, so anything was possible.

Last but not least, snoring softly across the aisle, there was Everett Thomas, better known as Synch. He was everything Jubilee was not: charming, articulate, handsome, black, from a frightfully well-adjusted family, and of course male. His power allowed him to “synch” with the auras of other mutants, taking on their abilities and mutations temporarily. Jubilee also found herself synching with him on a more personal level, and was bedeviled with what she should do about it.

They were her friends now, her family for better or worse. They were Generation X, and the only thing she could call home. She sighed and wished she could sleep. She was getting deep and introspective, and she hated that.

Under the cabin floor, motors whirled, and something thumped. The landing gear was coming down. She glanced out the window, scanning the carpet of city lights for some familiar eastern New York or western Massachusetts landmark, and spotted the Space Needle.

The Space Needle? That's in Seattle. “Seattle?” she said loudly enough that Synch jumped up straight in his seat and opened his eyes.

He blinked and looked around. “Where?”

“Down there.” She pointed. “We're landing in Seattle.”

“Wha—?” The book slipped out of Paige's lap as she moved.

“Seattle,” said Synch. “We're in Seattle.”

An annoyed growl came from the direction of Monet's seat. “We can't be in Seattle,” she said with exasperation. “We're supposed to be going back to the school.”

Jubilee smiled at M's mistake. *Not perfect this time, missy.* "Tell it to the Space Needle."

"*Dios,*" Angelo groaned, pulling in his skin like a window shade rolling up, "can't a mutant get some Z's around here? I need my beauty sleep."

Jono said nothing, but Jubilee could see him leaning over to peer out the cabin window. The last few weeks had been difficult for him, and he was still dealing with it. Of course, with Jono, "dealing with it" was a daily event.

Jubilee stared at the closed cockpit door. She was suddenly feeling a little paranoid, not necessarily a bad thing when you're mutant and most of the world is out to get you. She leaned toward M. "Hey, Monet, do a telepathic scan of the cockpit. We haven't been hijacked by Sinister or Skrulls or O.J. Simpson or anything, have we?"

Monet scowled at her. "I don't read minds."

"Yeah, right. If there's a *Big Book of Super Powers*, your picture is on every page. Just do it."

M glanced toward the front of the cabin and smiled. "Let Jono do it. He doesn't look busy."

"This is serious."

"So am I. I'll help." She leaned forward. "Hey, handsome. Jono."

"Bug off, gel." Jono was a living battery of psionic energy. While his skills were currently limited to shooting bio-blasts and projecting his "speech" telepathically, in theory he had the potential to do more subtle telepathic tricks, at least in the way that dynamite theoretically can be used to cut a diamond.

"Come on, work with me. Just open your mind a little and . . ."

Jono stared intently at the closed door for a moment. "Hey, it's working. Is that me or you, M? Ms. Frost and Sean and the pilot are having a chat." He jerked slightly and Jubilee felt something like one of her fireworks go off inside her skull. "Whoops. I know I did that. Guess they know we were peeking now."

Jubilee rubbed her head. "They probably know we were peeking in San Francisco. Ouch."

The door swung open and Emma stepped out, glancing curiously at Jono, then looking more sternly at Monet.

Jubilee suppressed a chuckle. *Glad that look isn't for me.*

As she watched, Emma composed herself, straightening her jacket. She was dressed in a closely tailored white business suit and matching boots. *I wish I could wear clothes that well.* Jubilee sighed to herself. *I just need some more realistic models on which to base my body image. Somebody buy me a Barbie doll.*

Emma had felt Jono's clumsy attempt at a probe even before he did, and instinctively put up shields around not only herself, but Sean and the pilot as well.

Sean stared at her. He'd felt it even through her shields. "What in blazes was that, Emma? Are we under attack?"

She shook her head and glanced back in the direction of the cabin. "The students are awake, and engaged in a little unauthorized telepathic experimentation. M and Chamber. Doing what children do. Of course, if they'd incapacitated the pilot, it would have killed us all." Jonothan Starsmore had incredible telepathic potential, but he was all power and no control. His attempts at the simple mind tricks that she did as automatically as breathing were like trying to swat a fly with a cannon. M had no business pushing him to test himself this way.

Sean sighed. "And that would be bad. Ye want I should have a talk with them?" He glanced out through the windshield. Landing lights could be seen in the distance, as could the lumbering 747 coming in ahead of them. He frowned. "You'd best talk to them, then. I'll stay here in case 'Ace'—" he jerked his thumb at the pilot "—needs some help landing."

The pilot grinned without losing his focus. He knew Sean from his Interpol days, and the two of them enjoyed needling each other in that exceedingly male way that Emma found so tiresome. She put her shoulders back, and stepped through the door at the rear of the cockpit.

The students looked guilty. They always looked guilty when she stepped into the room, but she'd learned to ignore that. Experience had shown that they were only occasionally guilty, and that the rest of the time—well, it was just an effect she had on people. It would have been easy enough to lightly scan through their minds and make a final determination, but Sean had repeatedly lectured her about respecting their privacy, and she was trying.

But telepathy wasn't the only way to read a person's thoughts. She knew that Chamber and M had produced the psi burst; she'd talk with them privately about it later. But there was more to the situation than that. Emma studied Jubilee's face and realized that it was she who'd initiated the scan, probably asking M to do it, and for perfectly good reasons. She'd have done the same in Jubilee's place.

Husk yearned to lead the team, but Jubilee had the experience and the nose for trouble, if not always the wisdom and self-confidence. The two girls didn't always get along, but the two of them might make an outstanding leadership team someday.

The front of the passenger cabin formed a small lounge, with swivel chairs, cocktail tables, and lamps—all bolted down of course. Since the FASTEN SEAT BELT sign was on, Emma sat in one of the chairs, belted herself in, and swung around to face the students.

"As you've noticed, there's been a change of plans." She met Jubilee's gaze. "You were wise to be cautious, but actually, Sean and I had simply intended to surprise you. Since our trip to Ireland turned out to be more work than play, and it is the beginning of the summer term, we thought you might enjoy a real vacation."

Jubilee moaned in mock horror. "In Seattle? That is so last-year. I suppose you'll want us to wear flannel and drink Starbucks by the barrel."

Synch sniffed the air. "Smells like Nirvana," he said with a chuckle.

Paige put her face against the window. "Smells like rain."

Emma frowned. She'd missed most of her own childhood, and had little patience for horseplay. This was supposed to be a pleasant surprise. "We aren't staying in Seattle, that's just our starting point. We'll be purchasing a pair of recreational vehicles and making the rest of the trip home by highway."

Jubilee perked up. "Road trip?"

Paige smiled broadly. "Road trip!"

It wasn't clear who started it, but they began to chant softly, "Road trip, road trip, road trip."

Emma stared mournfully at the seat belt sign, and wondered if it was too late to return to the cockpit and force the plane into a crash-dive.

. . .

The plane taxied up to the customs office at the international terminal. It was foggy, and a fine, misty drizzle wafted down from unseen clouds above, not enough to require an umbrella, but anything that stayed out in the open long enough got just as wet. For once, Jubilee's ever-present yellow raincoat was getting some good use. They carried their own bags toward the terminal, the students laughing and joking among themselves.

Sean, ever the gentleman, took Emma's bag, and she wasn't about to stop him. She told him about the children's reaction to her announcement.

He grinned at her. "Aye, there's something about a road trip that takes five years off a young one's age."

Emma raised an eyebrow. "You mean, we can expect this for the next three thousand miles?"

Sean smiled wryly. "Didn't ye learn anything from your time with the Hellions?"

She felt a flash of hurt and annoyance. Generation X was the second group of young mutants that had gathered under Xavier's tutelage; the first were called the New Mutants. Emma, then the White Queen of the Hellfire Club—a cabal of mutants interested primarily in economic and political power—formed a youthful team of her own, nicknamed the Hellions. They had been slaughtered by a vile creature named Fitzroy, and the guilt of their deaths still haunted Emma. Taking care of Xavier's students was her personal penance for her mistakes, mistakes she'd vowed never to repeat.

She looked at the laughing children walking in front of them. They trusted her to watch their backs. Trust was one gift Emma Frost had rarely received in her life, one gift that could not be bought.

She glared into Sean's eyes. To suggest that she had learned nothing from the Hellions, even at the cost of their lives . . . She paused to reflect. Sean was no telepath, but he could be remarkably effective at mental manipulation nonetheless, and she'd noticed that he was much less reserved of that ability when it came to Emma than with others. *Touché, Sean.*

"You have a point, Mr. Cassidy? I'd suggest you get to it, before I'm tempted to adjust your drool reflex."

"Ye kept a tight reign on the Hellions, a close watch on

them, and to an extent, I agree with that. These kids aren't quite adults yet. They need some control and supervision, but we've got to give them room to make their own mistakes too. Without that, they'll never learn, never mature."

"You're saying . . . ?"

"We should attempt to haul back on the mother hen instincts."

She started to take offense, and he saw it in her face.

He shrugged and grinned. "I was mainly talking about myself, lass. I'm the mother of all hens."

At that, she laughed. He used that Irish charm to his advantage too, but this time she was willing to let it slide by.

She glanced up as a tractor pulling a string of canvas-draped baggage carts snaked between them and the students. The canvas on the lead cart had been thrown back and five men in airline coveralls squatted inside. The tractor slowed to avoid the children, and in doing so, sputtered and stalled. The driver stared at the vehicle's dashboard, as though unfamiliar with its operation, then tried to restart it. The men in the cart instantly became agitated and were hissing instructions to the driver.

She realized that Sean had casually put his hand on her arm, but his fingers were far too tight on her flesh. She slipped into his mind.

In the forward cart—his thoughts were as clear as a laser, his policeman's training cutting in—among those cleaning tools, there's an assault rifle. You can just see the barrel and clip poking out. And there's probably more where that came from.

She reached out to the minds of the men on the luggage train, lightly brushing the surface of each. It was enough. Their intent was clear and unguarded. *There's a bomb in the last cart, Sean. They're taking it to the international terminal.*

Sean nodded. *Bombs are my kind of business. Don't let them see me.*

She projected a mental distraction at the men. They all glanced toward the international terminal, as though they'd heard a noise. Sean rushed forward, lifted the canvas, and slipped inside the trailing cart.

She tapped into his head again, for a moment looking through his eyes. She saw three large plastic barrels, robin's-

egg blue, bound together with red nylon stripes and wired into a metal box on top. *Is it as bad as it looks?*

His thoughts were grim. *Not as bad as Oklahoma City, but enough to total the terminal, and us, for sure. I've got no tools, but I can disarm it with my sonic powers. It won't be quiet, though, and I don't want to be disturbed.*

Between two of the luggage carts, she could see the students standing impatiently outside the door to customs, still unaware of the reason for the delay. *Time to let them know. It will be a good exercise for the children.*

Emma! Don't!

Concentrate on the bomb. The children will be safe.

She telepathically alerted the students, at the same moment planting a mental suggestion in the mind of each of the terrorists. As the children rushed forward, the alerted terrorists reached for their weapons, and instead picked up the mops and brooms that camouflaged the rifles. She'd already alerted the students to her plan, so they weren't surprised by the faux weapons.

Husk took the lead but, to Emma's surprise, didn't use her powers to shed her skin for some more combat-worthy form. Instead, she directed the others.

"Pick your man," yelled Husk, letting the others sweep by on either side. Jubilee, her powers most effective at a distance, made the first strike, blinding the driver with a large yellowish fireball, then blasting his "weapon" to splinters with a smaller red one, finally knocking him off his feet with a large blue explosion that Emma could feel deep in her rib cage. Jubilee grinned and blew smoke off the tip of her index finger.

Skin ran low and zigzagged, avoiding imaginary bullets with the caution of someone all too familiar with gunfire. When he was close enough, he snapped his right forearm, whipping the skin of his hand out to wrap around a terrorist's ankles, then using the strength of both arms to yank the man's feet from under him. Using the elastic properties of his amazing epidermis, Skin shot forward like a rock from a slingshot, flying right over the fallen man and knocking the broom from his hands. He hit the ground running on the far side of the action.

From inside the luggage cart, Emma could periodically hear

Sean's sonic scream blast for a moment, as he cut a wire or disabled a circuit.

M flew past her, making no effort to hide herself or avoid fire. Her invulnerability might have made that unnecessary even if the weapons were real, but it still bothered Emma. M's arrogance might someday be her downfall. She settled lightly in front of the largest of the terrorists, a bristle-topped giant who stared at her with open amazement. She seemed to study his expression for a moment before flicking her fingers into the man's chin. It was a small gesture, and her super strength only threw the man about six feet before he landed in a heap.

To her right, Chamber and Synch were moving in unison on two terrorists, one crouched behind the stalled tractor, the second trying frantically to get it restarted.

Chamber unhooked the scarf that covered the gaping hole in his face and chest. A halo of crimson energy flashed out like a nest of angry snakes made from fire, then flared into a solid column of energy that lanced out and neatly punched the motor right out of the tractor's hood. It rolled thirty feet before coming to a stop on the tarmac, still glowing red hot in spots. The terrorist behind the tractor had been thrown clear by the blast, and lay groaning on the tarmac.

The man in the driver's seat stood and began "firing" with a squeeze mop. Emma looked for Synch, but he had slipped from sight while she'd been watching Chamber. Unlike the others, Synch had no overt powers of his own. He could only "synch" with the auras of other mutants, and at the moment, all that he had available to him were his teammates.

Again she heard a sonic scream, but from the fog bank, not the trailer with the bomb. Then Synch came flying at the driver—having chosen to appropriate Sean's powers—blindsiding the man with a sonic blast, knocking him face first into the asphalt.

Synch landed at his side, his feet skidding to a halt, and laughed. "That's got to hurt."

That left one terrorist, and Husk, who still hadn't used her powers. Instead, she walked slowly toward the desperate man as though she owned the world. The man was buffaloed. He'd seen what the other kids had done, and didn't know what to expect from the blonde teenager stalking him.

Is the child showing off, Emma thought, or is she just insane?

Sean poked his head from under the tarp and nodded at Emma. The bomb was safe. He quickly scanned his surroundings, assessing the situation and trying to decide what, if anything, he should be doing about it.

Without taking her eyes off the remaining terrorist, Husk stooped to pick up a fallen push broom. She lifted the business end to her shoulder, squinted down the imaginary sights, and settled her aim between the man's widening eyes.

"Bang," she said.

The terrorist's eyes rolled back in his head, and he fainted.

There was a moment of silence. Then the other students began to applaud. Husk turned and took a bow.

Emma stepped angrily forward. "What did you think you were doing? Armed or unarmed, that man was a threat. Why didn't you use your powers?"

Paige's smile faded, but she stood her ground. She met Emma's eyes without flinching. "Strategic decision. The men weren't that big a threat, and we still needed to get out of the airport. If I husked, I'd be stuck in the alternate form for at least a while, and that would be conspicuous."

Emma blinked. The child was right.

Behind her, Sean was shaking in silent laughter.

Emma nodded. "Good thinking. It's easy to become too dependent on one's powers anyway," she said, giving M an icy stare. "There's more to effective combat than blasting away with everything you've got." She turned her glance to Jubilee. "That goes for you too."

Jubilee rolled her eyes and groaned. "Always the goat."

M crossed her arms defiantly across her chest. "Plenty to go around."

Sean had given up his laughing and was looking around anxiously.

Emma noticed a cluster of customs people just inside the glass doors, their hands and faces pressed against the foggy glass, and in the distance, she could hear sirens.

He nodded at her. "We'd best be going, and skip the paperwork. I know I sometimes discourage your using your mind tricks too much, but in this case—" he shrugged "—do what you have to do."

Her mind began to immediately sweep the area, seeking anyone in the office, on the apron, or up in the terminal who might have seen, jumbling their memories, causing them to remember fog and confusion rather than the faces of the students, or where they'd come from.

Then her mind touched someone approaching them. There was a flash of terror, the image of a blue steel automatic pistol pressed into a neck, and the smell of gun oil, too close. She spun. The bomb had distracted her from scanning the area in detail as she should have when things had first started to go wrong. One more terrorist had been hiding nearby, unseen, and he had found a hostage.

The terrorist was tall and gaunt, wiry muscles showing in his forearms where they poked out of his coveralls. His hair was short, black flecked with gray, his eyes pale blue and seething with unchecked emotion. Emma didn't have to scan the fear, the anger, the adrenaline-produced elation. She could read them in his eyes. "Get back, imperialist puppets!" The man's voice carried a heavy Central European accent. "I will shoot him if I have to. Get back!"

The hostage was a security guard, slightly overweight and obviously approaching retirement. The terrorist's left hand held his throat, pulling the guard back against his chest, the gun barrel jammed deep into the soft folds of the man's neck.

Emma attempted to correct her oversight, slipping into the man's mind. She wondered if this was how Sean had felt when confronted with the bomb. The pistol's safety was off, the terrorist's finger twitching on a hair trigger.

Given time, she could slip into his mind, paralyze his hand, stop him in a hundred ways, but now she could hear the sirens approaching. Security guards would be here in seconds, police and SWAT teams in minutes. Soon there would be dozens of bystanders, hundreds of guns, and the situation could spiral out of Emma's control. She couldn't handle the terrorist and all the others too. There was no choice.

Chamber, take him, and take him hard.

Jono had frozen in midaction when the hidden terrorist appeared, his scarf over his face but not secured, only his hand holding it in place. He dropped the scarf.

The terrorist's eyes went wide, and for a moment Emma was afraid he would pull the trigger. Then his grip on the

hostage loosened, and the guard tried to pull free. The gun slipped away from the guard's neck.

Energy exploded from Chamber's chest. The gun seemed to vanish from the terrorist's hand, his fingers bleeding, his head snapping back as the beam of force glanced off his cheek. He fell backward. The hostage slumped to the ground, from fright rather than injury.

Emma looked for the gun. It was embedded in the concrete wall of the passenger terminal thirty feet behind them. She scanned the terrorist's mind. He was unconscious, but apparently only slightly injured.

Chamber stepped forward, extending a hand to help the guard up.

The guard shrank back, staring at him with openmouthed horror. He swatted Chamber's hand away. "Get away from me, you—freak!" He lay down, hiding his face behind his arm. "Mutant freak. Monster. Don't touch me. Freak."

Chamber stumbled backward a few steps, then looked at Sean for guidance.

Sean was distracted. Security guards were running toward them from three directions, weapons drawn. "Emma!"

"I know." She reached out. Handling so many minds at once, all so intently focused on them, was a strain even for her talents. The fog helped, allowing their minds to easily question their vision, to feel that they were in a dream. She used that. One by one they relaxed, emerging from their hiding places, lowering their weapons, trotting up to put handcuffs on the fallen terrorists and to collect the weapons.

Sean and most of the children headed for a gate in a nearby noise fence. Dozens of police officers ran past them as though they were invisible, thanks to Emma's talents. Only Chamber remained, staring silently at the security guard. She could only imagine what he was feeling; she didn't have the time or energy to find out for herself. "Go," she said, "I'll be right behind you."

One loose end to clear up first. The security guard who had cursed his rescuer. Emma reached into his mind and wiped his memories of the event.

She was not gentle.

• • •

The prearranged stretch limousine was waiting for them outside the terminal. The driver was a longtime employee of Frost Enterprises, and knew better than to ask questions about what was going on. He merely loaded the luggage in the trunk, opened the doors for them, glanced at the written address that Emma handed him, and they were shortly on their way through a typical airport strip of business hotels and car rental lots. The rain had stopped, and shafts of sunlight could be seen through the clouds ahead.

Sean leaned back from the forward passenger seat and scanned the kids' faces. "I want ye all to know, mistakes were made, but that's gonna happen. All in all, ye did good out there, especially you, Paige, and you, Jono. Ye could have taken that perp's head clean off with your blast. . . ."

Jubilee clucked. "It wouldn't'a been a great loss, if you ask me."

Sean shot her a look, then focused his attention on Jono, who sat off to one side, his forehead against the glass, looking blankly out at the passing traffic. "But you handled it like a surgeon. Precision and control. I'm proud of ye, lad."

Jono said nothing, and an uncomfortable silence followed.

Emma squirmed in her seat. She could ease the boy's mind with little more than a thought. It was within her power, but she also remembered what Sean had said to her. Jono had to learn to live with what he was, with how the world looked at him, no matter how painful.

Outside, they were entering the freeway headed north for the city. The fog was starting to burn off, and they could get a look at the landscape rolling by.

Paige finally broke the silence. "It's so green."

"They call it the Emerald City," volunteered Everett.

I need to find the Wizard and ask him to give me a face.

Emma glanced at Jono, who hadn't moved. Had he really projected the thought, or had she only imagined it?

"Where are we going?" asked Paige, climbing forward for a better look at the sparkling skyline rising ahead of them.

Emma nodded appreciatively. It was a good time to change the subject. "Someplace that should cheer us all up." She paused for effect. "We're going to a party."

. . .

The four-door sedan was silver-gray, of American make, several years old, needed washing, and was in every way undistinguished, an impression that had been carefully calculated. As Ivan merged with the heavy morning traffic on northbound Interstate 5, making sure to remain several cars behind the limousine, his car's inconspicuous appearance was a special blessing.

While it is possible to follow a car with only a single vehicle, it is not advisable. There are too many ways to lose the target car, too many ways to be spotted. Still, Ivan was very good at what he did.

Though he had never had any formal training by the KGB, for whom he had acted as an informant until the fall of the Soviet government, he had made it something of a hobby to pick up techniques and information from the agents with whom he had worked. He could tail a car, or plant a listening device, or kill a man with his bare hands. He had hoped someday that the KGB would welcome him as one of their own. Instead, they had made him a scapegoat for their own misdeeds, and forced him to flee in the confusion of the Soviet breakup.

Nonetheless, he thought as he changed lanes to keep pace with the limousine, it had brought him to this land of unexpected opportunity, and his instincts told him that the occupants of the limo represented another one.

Without taking his eyes off his quarry, he reached down, picked up a cellular phone, and punched a speed-dial button. He ignored the recording that answered on the second ring, and punched in a five digit code.

The phone rang twice more before a man answered. "This is the Expatriate."

"This is Ivan. The diversion worked, and the package is on a truck bound for the transfer point. Some interesting complications arose, however."

There was a pause from the other end of the line. Somewhere in the background, Ivan could hear a radio commercial playing. "What kind of complication?"

"Mutants."

"You're sure? The X-Men?"

"I don't think so. Several had obvious mutations, though.

My mind was probed, but the KGB taught me techniques to resist. Still, it was a close thing. Most were young, not much more than children. Two adults as well, but they stayed in the background and exhibited no obvious mutations. No uniforms, but they clearly had drilled their combat skills."

"The World Federalists?"

"They were easily captured, the fools. The bomb was never planted and did not go off. They did not provide nearly the diversion we had hoped for. We barely had time to escape the customs warehouse with the package, but all is well."

"Mutants. This disturbs me, my friend, for obvious reasons. Can you follow them? Find out who they are and what their interests are. If they're onto our plan, I need to know it."

Ivan smiled. Just south of downtown Seattle the limousine turned off the freeway and he carefully followed. "I anticipated your request. I am following them already. I can catch up with the package later."

"I'm counting on you, Ivan. Find out about them. Send me pictures. We've come too far, the two of us, to let more of these blasted American mutants interfere."

Ivan smiled. The chase was on. He lived for this. "They will not interfere." He chuckled. "Mutants can be formidable adversaries, but they do not frighten me. They bleed like everyone else."

CHAPTER TWO



“Topping our headlines, two are dead in the Ohio ‘Mutant Panic,’ including an eighty-six-year-old man with an asthma condition struck down on a crowded downtown street corner. According to one witness, an unidentified attacker yelled, ‘He’s breathing funny. He’s one of them,’ then fired a pistol at short range. A forty-six-year-old woman was found dead in her burned home. Riot-related arson is suspected. Dayton city police have taken a twenty-two-year-old man into protective custody. The man, who has not been identified as a mutant, is believed to be the cause of the panic. He was wearing a costume and helmet similar to that often worn by mutant terrorist Magneto. He claimed to have donned the costume in order to appear in a college film project.”

—excerpt from WNN news report

The limo bounced over a too-deep rain gutter and into the parking lot of Kirby & Ditko's RV World. The car parked next to a long line of boxy motor homes draped with plastic flags and Mylar balloons. Emma looked disdainfully around. A balloon, printed with a yellow smiley-face, fluttered down to grin at her through the tinted window.

Jubilee just looked confused. "This is a party?"

Emma pressed her lips together. "Not my idea of a party, certainly."

One corner of Sean's mouth twitched up as he studied Emma. "Something bothering ye, lass? You look like you just bit into some grocery-store caviar."

"Something like that." She watched as an elderly couple, wearing fringed straw hats and matching Hawaiian shirts, strolled by. "I should have had the forethought to have these things delivered."

Sean's grin was turning into more of a full-blown smile. "Ye can be a bit of a snob, ye know that, Emma?"

She slid down in her seat, but she found herself grinning sheepishly. "It's just so *déclassé*, so—trailer park. I keep expecting a tornado to swoop down at any moment."

"They don't have tornadoes in Seattle," said Everett helpfully.

"I was speaking figuratively, child." She glanced at the students, who were busy fidgeting and talking among themselves. She had an idea. "Kids, why don't you go pick our homes away from home."

They all stopped what they were doing and looked at her. A grin, bordering on a leer, split Angelo's face. "What? You want *us* to buy one of these things?"

"Two of them, actually. One for the boys, one for the girls."

"Price . . . ?" began Everett, always the practical one.

"Is no object," Emma completed his sentence.

Monet and Jubilee high-fived each other, in agreement for once.

"Just find something comfortable—" Emma watched in horror as a clown passed by on a unicycle "—and don't make me get out of the car."

Sean chuckled. "I'll go find some salesman you can give your card to, and drag him back here with the paperwork."

The driver had already stepped around and opened the door. Sean paused halfway out and looked back at the kids. "Ye heard the lass. Go shopping."

There was a cheer, and the kids nearly trampled him on their way out. They immediately divided up by gender and went off in opposite directions. Sean shook his head and strolled toward the sales office, a modular building draped in red, white, and blue bunting.

Emma sighed and checked the caviar in the limousine's refrigerator. To her relief, it was not from a grocery store.

Given the bewildering variety of RVs to choose from, the girls simply looked for the row where the largest ones were parked. Jubilee stopped in front of the first one, put her hands on her hips, and peered up into the windshield. "This looks like it should sleep four people."

Monet sniffed. "This looks like it should sleep all of Monaco, with room left over for Rhode Island."

Jubilee looked at her quizzically. "Too large?"

Shrugging, Monet pushed off with her feet, floating a few meters into the air, peering over the top of the roof.

Paige waved frantically. "Monet! Get down from there! Somebody will see you!"

Monet floated gently back to the ground. "No satellite dish," was all she said.

Jubilee mouthed a silent *Oh* and, without a moment's pause, turned toward the unit beyond. "Next."

After a moment, Monet followed her.

Paige stood her ground. "Wait just a minute. That's it? We're not even going to look at it? Who's making the decisions here?"

"Me." Jubilee and Monet spoke in perfect unison.

A pause, then Paige joined the chorus. "Me!" They all shouted at once.

Monet rolled her eyes. "I have the most refined tastes. Naturally it should be me."

Paige glared at her. "Says who?"

Jubilee waved her hand between them. "Hellooooo! Shopping? Who's the expert shopper here?"

"Me!" They were all in perfect unison again.

Paige crossed her arms over her chest. "I grew up in the country."

"Ah know," Jubilee said in an exaggerated version of Paige's southern drawl.

Paige reached over and flicked Jubilee's sunglasses off her forehead, so they fell down awkwardly low on her nose. She was very sensitive about her Kentucky accent. "Point is, I probably know more about these rigs than both of you put together."

Jubilee pushed the glasses up with her index finger. "'Rig.' Ooooh. Trailer jargon. We are very impressed."

They all glared at one another for a moment, a small hostile triangle.

Paige sighed. She pointed at Monet. "Taste." Then at Jubilee. "Skill." Then at herself. "Expertise. What is it Ms. Frost and Mr. Cassidy are always telling us is the key to anything?"

Monet pursed her lips. "Teamwork?"

Paige nodded, "Teamwork. Individually we're good, but as a team . . ."

Jubilee lolled her head back and sighed an even bigger sigh. "As a team, we're awesome. I admit it." She dropped her chin and peered over her glasses at the others. "Let's shop, girlfriends."

The street was a dead end on a hill overlooking the RV dealership. Along either side were facing rows of elegant older houses, aging gracefully among the lush northwest greenery. All save a monstrous, modern town house, nearly overflowing its lot, clashing with the surrounding architecture, squatting on the ashes of the house it had replaced, a silent threat to the others: *We are coming, we will replace you one by one. You and your kind are doomed.*

Ivan glanced at the town house as he took the digital camera from the trunk of his car. In its own way, the building was a mutant, and it represented the threat of all mutants. Even just sitting there, minding their own business, they were a threat, one that could not be tolerated.

He walked back to the guardrail barrier that blocked the end of the street, stepped over it, and sat on the edge of the cold metal. He turned on the camera and lifted the viewfinder so

he could see. The digital zoom brought the lot in close. He could see the big white limo parked near the office. There were two adults inside, one of whom seemed to be a salesman. The driver stood near the office, sipping coffee from a foam cup. The three girls were near the front of the lot; the boys had disappeared around the back of the service bay.

He zoomed in on the girls and snapped the shutter. Wonderful gadget, this, like the Global Positioning System and laptop mapping software that had found him this convenient overlook, and the satellite phone and fax that kept him in constant touch with both the Expatriate and his various underlings. Such an age that he lived in, such a country was America. One no longer had to have the resources of S.H.I.E.L.D. or Hydra or the KGB to have such devices. It was possible for a properly financed spy or criminal to become reasonably well equipped at the nearest Radio Shack.

As he snapped another shot, he thought of the package and smiled. Some things, though, very dangerous things, were still special. Some things had to be bought outside regular channels. Some things were worth the price.

He snapped one more shot, then returned to the car's trunk, where he plugged the camera into a laptop computer equipped with a cellular modem. He removed the phone from under his coat and flipped it open, punched the speed-dial button, waited for the answer, then entered a series of access codes.

The Expatriate answered on the second ring.

"Pictures are on their way to the web site. You should have them anytime now."

There was a relieved chuckle from the phone. "You do good work, Ivan. Knowing you have the situation under control takes a burden from my mind. The package?"

"It will arrive at the transfer point in Spokane by nightfall. These—people give no sign of being aware of us or the package, either before or now. I think it was only a coincidence that they were at the airport. It appears that they are planning a trip by motor home, perhaps an extended one."

"They could be following the package."

"I do not believe so."

"Still, I want them traced. We have to assume they are a threat until proven otherwise. Put tracking devices on their

vehicles. Find out what you can about their destination.”

“And if they prove not to be a threat?”

“They’re *mutants*. I’ve not forgotten the ways of Genosha, my friend. I will find a way to make them—useful.”

Emma stood in the limousine’s open sunroof and nodded with approval at the huge, luxurious motor home that had just driven up. It was the driver that bothered her. She watched as the three excited girls bounced around the front bumper, ready to show off their prize.

Emma caught Jubilee’s attention and signaled her disapproval with a single raised eyebrow. “Do you really think you should have been driving that behemoth?”

Jubilee gave her one of those *adults are such idiots* looks that Emma was becoming well acquainted with. “Please. This is a parking lot. I know lots about driving in parking lots. Besides, it’s ours now, so if we break it, it’s our problem.”

“Actually, it’s my problem, but never mind that now. I think this—” she gestured at the RV “—will do.”

A backfire punctuated her sentence, followed by the clattering roar of a diesel engine, growing louder by the second, and accompanied by a piledriver thump that could only be the sound of too much sound system in too little vehicle.

The thing screeched around the corner of the office, belching black smoke from a pair of semitruck-style vertical exhaust stacks. As it slid to a stop in front of the car, Emma could only think that it was the product of a very creative, but deranged, soul.

Dozens of marker lights and reflectors decorated its sides, the mud flaps featured a chromed silhouette of a reclining woman, and a pair of steer horns perched in the center of its stubby hood. Emma caught a glimpse of yellow surrey fringe on the windows and orange shag carpeting on the interior walls. But the single most striking thing about it was what appeared to be a jet fighter’s bubble cockpit crudely grafted to the roof’s centerline, providing both a skylight and a scenic lookout for a single passenger. She found herself wondering if it had a functional ejection seat.

Jono, sitting in the driver’s seat, shut down the engine but didn’t move from his perch. Though it was impossible, Emma could swear he was smiling. *Well, at least something has im-*

proved his mood. Maybe this trip will turn out to be therapeutic yet.

The girls stared at the thing, openmouthed. Jubilee finally yelled over the pounding music, "Those aren't woofers. I think it's haunted!"

The door opened on the far side, and there was a momentary hissing sound, followed by a metallic clattering. Angelo rounded the front of the vehicle, shaking a can of red spray paint. He glanced at Emma. "Speakers grande, huh?"

Then he stepped over to the big manufacturer's logo on the side and painted over the first part of it with a big X. Bloody rivulets of paint dripped down.

Sean returned from the sales office with a handful of papers. He caught Jono's eye, and made a cutting motion across his own neck. Jono reached down and turned off the music.

"What in bleeding hell," Sean asked, "do you call this?"

Angelo gave him another *idiot adult* look, and pointed at the freshly repainted logo. "The Xabago."

Everett came around the corner, arms out, palms up. "I tried to talk them out of it."

Sean looked up at the monstrosity. "I can't sleep in this."

Jono leaned back in the high-backed driver's seat and put his hands behind his head. "Ease up. You can have the water bed."

Angelo beamed at the girls. "We've got two thousand watts per channel."

The girls looked smug and Jubilee shrugged her chin toward the satellite dish on the roof of their RV. "We've got five hundred channels."

Everett groaned.

Jono leaned over the steering wheel. "They had it hidden out back. It was a trade-in. They weren't even going to try and sell it. Can you bleeding imagine?"

Sean was staring at Emma. Obviously he could imagine.

Everett smiled sheepishly. "It's a mutant, we're mutants, I guess they just couldn't resist. Heck, I have to admit it kind of grows on you. The bubble seat is cool." He glanced back at Jubilee and the smile faded. "Five hundred channels. Seriously?"

Sean walked in a tight, frustrated circle. "Emma?"

She smiled. Sean had been giving her a hard time all day.

It was her turn now. "I did tell the students they could pick, Sean."

Angelo wandered around the back of the camper, a puzzled look on his face. "I forgot to check. Does this thing have a bathroom?"

At Sean's groan, Emma smiled sweetly. "But, Sean, you have the water bed."

CHAPTER THREE



“As rumors continue to circulate that yesterday’s bomb incident at Sea-Tac Airport was somehow mutant related, it’s time to re-examine our response to these dangerous and uncontrolled weapons of nature. Though no actual mutant presence has been associated with Sunday’s mutant panic in Dayton, the events there only serve to highlight the justified fear that the public feels of mutants.

“While the White House has been mum on the issue, officials on other parts of Capitol Hill have assured us that the government is aware of the problem, and that mutant control measures and technologies are in constant development. Even now, elements of the House are testing the waters for a new round of mutant control legislation.

“While this movement is reassuring, these two incidents only remind us that the mutant menace can strike anywhere, and that we must be prepared for that eventuality. If the government isn’t ready, one can hardly blame the fearful citizenry for taking matters into their own hands. While the deaths of two apparently innocent individuals (and we remind our readers that genetic testing is not yet complete) in Dayton is tragic, we need only look to the Capitol to see where the real responsibility for their deaths lies.”

—editorial, *Seattle Port-Authority Newspaper*

Frost Industries had an office in Bellevue, a Seattle suburb located a few miles to the east across Lake Washington. Emma had arranged to have the RVs delivered there, and they continued on in the limousine for the time being. Their path took them briefly east as well, but they turned off the freeway just short of Lake Washington and wound their way past stately brick buildings, up narrow backstreets lined with old-growth trees and bumper-to-bumper parked cars. To their right, they could occasionally catch glimpses of Lake Union, and a marina as jammed with pleasure craft as the streets were with parked cars.

Angelo rolled down the window and stuck out his head for a better look at the lake, then jerked it in as they came a little too close to the mirror of a parked car. "*Dios*. I see why we didn't bring the rigs—" he glanced at Paige to see if he'd gotten it right; she nodded "—rigs up here."

Paige opened the sunroof and stood up. "It's safer up here," she called. "I must have missed the sign. Is this a college?"

Sean leaned back and spoke loudly enough to be heard over the road noise, something his mutant power made easy enough to do. "Western Pacific University, lass. Home of one of the country's last chapters of M.O.N.S.T.E.R."

Paige leaned down to peek inside. "Monster? What's that?"

He smiled that enigmatic smile that Paige found so annoying. "You'll see at the party."

Jubilee looked skeptical. "Again with the party business? You sure we aren't just headed for the Wal-Mart or something this time?"

Angelo started to join Paige standing in the sunroof, but Emma took his arm and gently pushed him down. "Too many people around, Angelo, and I can't brain-scramble everyone as we drive past. I'm having some holographic image inducers sent out from the school. You'll get yours later."

He dropped back into his seat with a huff. Paige smiled.

Sean looked back from the front passenger seat. "Sorry, but she's right, lad. Besides, we're here."

The limo pulled into a reserved parking spot in a driveway next to what had obviously been a frat or sorority house, now gone slightly to seed. The grass was neatly mowed and the grounds clean, but the paint was faded and peeling in places.

Rusted gutters scabbed with patches and a few broken window-panes carefully replaced with wood evidenced an interest in maintenance, if not the resources to do it properly.

On the front of the building, it could be seen that there had once been three large Greek letters displayed, but two were long gone, leaving only faded shadows behind. The third consisted of three parallel horizontal lines, the middle one somewhat shorter.

Paige looked at the sign. "I never got much past *gamma*. What's that letter mean?"

Sean opened his door and climbed out. "It's *chi*, the Greek equivalent of X. There's a Greek letter that looks like an X but that's more like a C."

Jubilee frowned. "That's clear as mud."

"Aye," replied Sean, "that's the general idea. When you're mutants, you don't want to be too obvious about things."

"Oh?" The implication hit Paige. "Ooooooh."

Sean nodded. "We're among friends here. Come on."

As they walked up to the door, Jono peered skeptically through the front windows. There were no curtains, and the visible rooms were empty except for a few odds and ends of randomly placed furniture, as though someone had moved out and the landlords hadn't gotten around to cleaning yet.

Sean pushed the doorbell, but Paige couldn't hear any ring. She was surprised when, only a minute or so later, the door was opened by a smiling young man with pale blue eyes. Those eyes lit with immediate recognition when he spotted Sean. "Mr. Cassidy, I know you from your pictures. We've got quite a clipping file here." He shoved out his hand with a practiced sense of drama that couldn't be ignored. "I'm the chapter president, Peter B. DeMulder, but everyone calls me Chill. Glad to meet you."

Chill was an inch taller than Sean, and had a swimmer's slim, athletic build. His short, bristly hair reminded Paige of the way her big brother used to wear his, but while Sam's was a golden blond, Chill's was only a few shades away from white, with just a trace of pale yellow.

Sean took Chill's outstretched hand and seemed a little startled at the touch.

Chill smiled sheepishly. "Sorry about that. Cold hands,

warm heart and all." He turned to Emma. "And you must be Ms. Frost. I'm honored."

She took his hand gingerly, but if she experienced anything unusual, she didn't show it. "Chill."

His smile ratcheted up another hundred watts or so. "With names like ours, I hope we can be friends."

Paige expected Emma to brush off what could be taken as open flirting, but after a moment's pause, she actually cracked a slight smile. Paige had to admit that it was hard not to like the guy. He was so sincere.

Chill scanned the area around the door quickly. He waved them inside. "Let's get off the doorstep. I can meet the rest of you folks on our way downstairs." He ushered them all inside. "Welcome to M.O.N.S.T.E.R. house."

He quickly exchanged greetings and handshakes with the students, starting with Angelo. If he was in the least surprised or bothered by Angelo's unusual appearance or the feel of the loose, rubbery skin on his hands, Chill gave no sign of showing it. Paige had to admit that it had given even her shivers the first time she'd touched him.

Chill led them through a number of empty rooms, including a huge kitchen at the back of the house, and into what appeared to be a walk-in pantry. A few boxes and canned goods still dotted the expansive white shelves that lined the walls. He pushed against the rear wall, and it swung open with a click, shelves and all.

Beyond it was a small unfurnished lobby, with a cramped, utilitarian elevator and a stairway going down. They took the stairs.

As they descended, the walls changed from painted drywall to some kind of soft material tacked down with a covering of chicken wire. "Soundproofing," he explained. "Kind of James Bond, I know, but we're trying to keep a low profile here, and," he added with a shrug, "you never know what the future will bring." They passed through another heavy swinging door, and Paige could hear a hint of music. They stepped into a long, narrow space, like a hallway with only two doors, the one they'd come through, and another right in front of them. A smaller stairway led down to the right. "Double walls with an air space between," said Chill. "More soundproofing."

When Chill opened the other door, the music came full force, loud but not overwhelming, along with the sounds of a lot of people moving and talking in a confined space. It smelled like sweat, perfume, fresh popcorn, and fruit punch.

Jubilee chirped, "Party! 'Bout time!"

Apparently, the room took up almost all of the basement. It was sparsely furnished with dorm castoffs, couches, unmatched banquet tables, and folding chairs. A deejay played music from a raised platform at one end of the room. In front of him was a small dance floor. Behind him hung a banner featuring a stylized hand with six fingers. Below that, the organization's name was finally explained in embroidered lettering: MUTANTS ONLY NEED SYMPATHY TOLERANCE AND EQUAL RIGHTS. M.O.N.S.T.E.R.

There were probably fifty people in the room, Paige guessed, some crowded onto the dance floor, others sitting around drinking, snacking, talking, and just hanging out. A few were obviously mutants, but it was hard to tell about the rest. She leaned closer to Chill so she could be heard. "Are these all mutants?"

He shook his head. "Probably a dozen or so of us here. Some of the rest are friends, family, people with mutant ties away from campus, outsiders and outcasts of other stripes, even a few X-groupies—'genogoths,' we call them—who like to hang with mutants just because they think it's cool."

Paige shuddered as someone with spiked hair and too many facial piercings walk by. "Sounds kind of creepy."

Chill smiled. "Can be, but most of them are okay. They're outsiders, too, and outsiders got to hang. Anyway, most of the mutants aren't exactly X-Men material, me included. I can make a slush ball or two, keep my drinks icy cold, and, if I don't concentrate, deliver a chilling handshake or literal cold feet." He chuckled. "Doesn't do much for my love life, I can tell you."

He looked out across the dance floor. "That's the reality of the x-factor gene. Most of the people who have it don't get world-shaking powers. Some of them get pretty badly messed up." He glanced at Angelo and Jono. "But I guess you know about that. That's why M.O.N.S.T.E.R. was founded, to create support and understanding for young mutants."

Jono scratched his nose. "You must get a lot of understanding down here in the bomb shelter."

Chill frowned and shrugged. "You know what it's like out there these days. At least, I guess you do. I keep expecting someday to answer that doorbell and find an armed mob or stormtroopers or Sentinels or God-knows-what waiting for me." He tilted his head and pursed his lips. "Party over. Game over."

Jono nodded in understanding.

Chill pulled them over to a circle of overstuffed chairs surrounding an oak coffee table, its surface carved with countless names and dates. "Come on over here. Let me introduce you to my personal posse."

Two other young men stood up from the chairs to greet them. One looked to be about the same age as Chill and was almost as tall, but he was half again as wide, heavy boned and muscled like a wrestler. His head was either shaved or naturally bald, and his ears stuck out too far, especially at the almost-pointed tips. Potentially, this combination of features could have been pug-ugly, but he had large, expressive brown eyes, a slightly cleft chin, and a matched set of dimples that showed when he smiled. Paige thought he was almost cute, in a very unconventional way.

The other was barely Paige's height, and looked too young for college. His features were youthful but sculpted, his reddish-blond hair sweeping across his high forehead in bangs. His eyes were dark and intense, but he kept them downcast as though he might be shy.

Chill waved at the big guy. "This is Willy Gillis. We call him Dog Pound. He's telepathic, but only with animals." He chuckled. "Tries to psi with a human, he just gives them a splitting headache."

Dog Pound shuffled in his sizable Nikes and looked uncomfortable. "I'm working on it."

Chill chuckled. "Pounder would give his right arm for a better mutant power. We can't convince him we'd like him just as much if he had none at all, or that cute little tail of his."

Dog Pound shot him a look that could wilt a cactus, but Chill ignored it. Paige caught herself trying to look around Dog Pound's back. If he had a tail, it was hidden in his pants.

With mutants, you could just never tell when somebody was kidding or not.

He indicated the smaller boy. "And this is my favorite little mutant homework pal, Scooter McCloud, aka 'Recall,' boy genius, broadcast major, finder of lost things, the mouse that roared."

Paige didn't understand that last until Recall spoke. "Glad to meet you all."

He didn't say much, but it was enough. He had one of the most beautiful male voices she'd ever heard, resonant, crisp, penetrating, but warm and comforting as well. It was no wonder he'd gone in for broadcasting.

She looked at him curiously. "You find things?"

Recall flushed a little. He was shy. "That's my mutant power, really. Helps me do some memory tricks, which is why everyone wants me in their study group, but I can find lost things—keys, wallets, stuff like that mostly. Comes in handy."

Paige smiled. "I bet. I'll look you up next time I misplace my math book."

Sean cleared his throat. "Chill, Emma and I would like to have a chat with ye, find out for the Professor how the chapter is holding up, see if there's anything we can do to help."

He seemed flattered that such important people wanted to have a conference with them. "We've got some offices in the sub-basement. It's quieter there." He beamed at the students and waved them out into the crowd. "Everybody, relax, mix it up. Food and drink is at the other end of the room, the music is cool, and the dance floor is hot." He glanced at Jono. "And if it's more comfortable, lose the scarf. Nobody here will mind."

Jono raised an eyebrow skeptically, but reached up and pulled his scarf off. A few people looked up as the energy welled up from his chest and face, but immediately went back to what they were doing.

Paige smiled. "Not bad, huh, Jono? I could get used to this place."

Suddenly a beautiful, towering Amazon, dressed in tight red leather and crowned with a flame-red Mohawk, swooped out of the crowd and planted herself in front of Jono. "Dance, tiger?"

Jono just blinked at her, but she grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the dance floor. After the first few steps, she didn't have to drag very hard.

Paige watched, mouth hanging open.

Chill shrugged. "Genogoths. Draws them like a magnet. I said nobody'd mind, but I didn't say nobody would care." He chuckled, then looked at Emma and Sean. "Let's go." He led them back toward the door.

Paige lost sight of Jono in the crowd.

Angelo glanced in the direction of the refreshments. "Hound Dog, let's go get a brew."

"That's Dog Pound," Pound objected, running his hand over his bald plate, "and they don't serve alcohol at these things."

He frowned. "Well, *amigo*, then lead me to your strongest root beer, the good stuff." They wandered off.

Jubilee and Everett drifted toward the dance floor, and Monet was standing in front of one of the speakers, rocking to the music, but looking otherwise like she was having one of her periodic zone-outs.

Paige suddenly felt very alone. Then she realized that Recall was standing in front of her. He was blushing again, but he didn't quite drop his eyes when she looked at him. "Um—want to dance?"

Courage under fire. She liked that, and besides, she was feeling a pang of jealousy over Jono's genogoth. She managed a lopsided grin and put out her hand. "Sure, why not?"

A brief reconnaissance of the house had revealed an excellent commercial alarm system and, considering the age and dilapidated appearance of the place, surprisingly good locks on all the windows, probably recently installed. Given time and the cover of darkness, Ivan could doubtless have defeated these measures. He had neither.

Instead, he donned the same heating repair coveralls that he'd used as a disguise at the airport, pocketed his false ID, and loaded the bottom tray of his toolbox with surveillance gear. Then he simply rang the doorbell.

The leather-clad teenager who answered the door could have easily played defensive line for any football team in the country. Instead, Ivan suspected, he spent most of his time

expanding his extensive tattoo collection and intimidating door-to-door salesmen. The young man listened to Ivan's story about an annual furnace inspection, scrutinized his ID, and finally showed him around the back of the building to where an outside door led into the furnace room.

Left alone, Ivan quickly discovered that the furnace room had no inside connection to the rest of the house. That left the ducts. Fortunately, Ivan was prepared. He removed a small device equipped with rubber tank treads from his toolbox. The device, known as an infiltrator, looked rather like an especially streamlined toy bulldozer. It was connected to a reel of thin, black-sheathed cable, and the other end of the cable connected to a small control box equipped with a screen and an earphone plug. This item he had not purchased from Radio Shack. Rather, he had sent several thousand dollars to a mail-order catalogue catering to bored executives with fantasies of being super-spies.

Ivan found the switch that turned on the heating system's blower. It would cover any noise the infiltrator might make. He removed a service panel near the blower and placed the infiltrator inside the duct. A flip of a switch, and the screen came to life on the control box. The infrared camera would allow him to steer the tiny device through the ducts, and a sensitive microphone would conduct even the tiniest sound to his earplug. Now, it was only a matter of placing the microphone somewhere where he might hear something useful.

The office walls were painted white. Brightly colored posters, pictures, and artifacts where everywhere, an obvious effort to make the windowless space less oppressive. Prominent was a poster of the blue-furred mutant Hank McCoy, better known by his public codename, the Beast. Hank, along with Bobby Drake, aka Iceman, had helped form the first M.O.N.S.T.E.R. chapter at Fontane College near Boston while they were both members of the super-team the Defenders, and Hank had directed a portion of the income from his several patents to the support of the organization.

Also centrally displayed was another poster, a blowup of a snapshot, judging from the graininess. It was a portrait of a somber looking young man with long dirty-blond hair and dark wraparound sunglasses. His hand was held near his face

in a half-fist. Sean could see that the hand had six fingers. Sean recognized him as Adrian Castorp, the college student whose tragic life story had ended in the founding of the Fontane chapter.

There was no desk in the room, only a table in the corner supporting an aging Circuits Maximus Classic computer. The other furnishings consisted of several locked filing cabinets speckled with decorative magnets and sticky notes, a few battered office chairs, and bookcases filled with titles like *Origins of Human Mutation*; *Inhuman Terror: The Magneto Story*; *Marvels*; *The Costumed Vigilantes of New York*; and *Webs*.

Sean settled into one of the chairs and scooted it to turn his back to the wall. Emma settled casually into the other, crossed her legs, and propped an index finger against her cheek.

Chill dropped heavily into a third near the computer, and slid into a comfortable slouch. "You look uncomfortable, Mr. Cassidy."

Sean feigned a smile he didn't really feel. "Call me Sean. Aye, there's something about this place that reminds me of a bunker. No offense."

Chill smiled a lopsided smile. His eyes took on an age far beyond his youth. "None taken. You feel it because it's true. Around here, we live each day like it's our last, because, frankly, we don't know. Not that we don't do a lot of serious work here, too, but as we work hard, we also play hard. How much does either of you know about M.O.N.S.T.E.R.?"

Emma said nothing and looked slightly troubled. Shortly before the founding of Generation X, Emma had gone through a rather traumatic telepathic occupation of the mind of Bobby Drake. It was possible that she still shared some of his memories, or perhaps she was only feeling an unpleasant sense of déjà vu. Telepaths had problems Sean could only begin to imagine.

He turned his attention back to Chill. "To tell ye the truth, I'd not heard of it until Hank and the Professor asked me to look in on you. Hank sends his best wishes, by the way, and says that he hopes to visit personally soon."

Chill nodded. "To him too. Dr. McCoy is our mentor, and one of our founders. He helped start the first chapter and has continued to act as advisor when his other duties allowed,

which hasn't been often enough." He sighed and looked up at the Beast's poster.

"M.O.N.S.T.E.R. was supposed to be a campus support group for mutants, especially those with smaller and less obvious mutations, the people who were too numerous for people like Professor Xavier to help directly. The first chapter was so successful that there were soon more than twenty chapters at schools across North America.

"Then, the mood of the country changed. One by one, the chapters were closed down, often through fear, intimidation, even sabotage. The Fontane College chapter had to go underground when, six months ago, the chapter house and national headquarters building was firebombed. Burned to the ground, and a lot of people's hopes with it. All their records were destroyed.

"We lost our own status as an official student organization last year, and received our own share of threats. So, we gave up our storefront office and quietly moved into the basement of this abandoned frat house. Things seem safe and secure enough right now, but we've given all the ground we can. We're back up against a cliff edge with nowhere to go but down."

Sean nodded. He was developing a new respect for this young man. Upstairs, Chill seemed overly friendly, almost frivolous. Sean could see now that some of that was an act, a positive face for the members, people for whom he felt a deep responsibility.

"Hank asked me to tell ye how pleased he is that you've been able to hold on. He has hopes that if even one chapter survives, it might be possible to relaunch the national organization at some point."

Chill laughed reflexively, then stopped himself. "Sorry, I didn't mean to do that. That would be wonderful, really, but it's a lot for us to think about right now. It's all we can do to keep ourselves going. We can't even advertise or put up flyers looking for members. We're totally underground at this point." He looked up at the poster of Hank for a moment, as though seeking some sort of absolution.

Chill sighed. "You know the genogoths upstairs, how your student said they were creepy? Well, there's some truth to that, but we've become very dependent on them lately. They're

our eyes and ears. They find new members for us and bring them in. They monitor the street talk, looking for antimutant activity. And when somebody is looking for us, for the wrong reasons, they usually try making contact with the genogoths first." He tapped his knuckles together nervously. "Sometimes those people get discouraged, have accidents. The genogoths protect us, sometimes not in ways we'd approve of, but perhaps in ways we need."

Emma said nothing. Sean wondered if that was approval he was reading in her face. He leaned forward, making the chair groan. "I guess that surprises me. Mutants usually take care of their own."

Chill held up his hand. White crystals of frost began to form on his fingers, spreading down over his palm, wrist, and finally ending halfway down his forearm. "That's my mutant power, most of it, anyway. I've worked up a few tricks over the years, but like I told your students, mostly it's just that my ice cream never melts and I don't need a sweater in the dead of winter."

"That's the sad reality of mutation. The x-gene hasn't given most of us great power. Most it gives only a little, and for some it offers only disfigurement and disability." He pointed at the other poster on the back wall. "That's Adrian Castorp, and without him there would be no M.O.N.S.T.E.R. His mutation gave him two extra fingers, and a host of neurological problems that ultimately left him paralyzed and partially blind. Yet his mutation was plenty of reason for people to hate him. For most of us, joining the X-Men isn't an option. We're just out here fighting to lead as normal a life as we can, and to be loved for who we are, and not what we are. Is that too much to ask?"

Sean looked down. "No, lad, it isn't."

Danced out and looking for someplace quieter to talk, Paige and Recall strolled toward the kitchen off one end of the big room. The air was filled with synthesizers and strong percussion. "What is this music, anyway? I've never heard it before."

"Devo," answered Recall. "They were big in the eighties, kinda before our time, but a lot of their music really speaks to mutants." He chuckled. "They get a lot of play around here."

They found Jubilee, Everett, and Angelo in the kitchen, along with Recall's friend Dog Pound. The four of them were sitting cross-legged on the linoleum counters, sipping sodas and talking.

Angelo looked up at Paige and smiled the way he did when he was ready to stir up trouble. "Hey, Paige, dancing queen! Giving it up so soon?" He glanced through the door toward the dance floor. "I see Jono is still shakin' it with his new *chica*."

Jubilee scowled at him. "Shut up, Angelo."

He tried to look innocent. "Just calling them like I see them. I can't help it if dancing-boy is a big man on campus."

Jubilee flicked a green spark off her index finger that popped just in front of Angelo's face and made him flinch. "I said, shut up."

Angelo looked contrite and held up his hands in surrender. "All right, all right! Just making conversation."

Paige smirked. She'd have to remember that she owed one to Jubilee.

Recall caught her eye shyly. He was a good dancer, if a little stiff. "Get you a drink?"

She nodded. "Cherry Stark, if you've got it."

Recall opened the fridge which was jammed with cans, reached unerringly halfway to the back, and grabbed one without looking. Cherry Stark. He grinned, obviously happy of the opportunity to show off. "It's not much of a power, but it comes in handy around the house." He jumped as a gray tendrill snaked past him, wrapped itself around a can of root beer, and snatched it away.

It was one of Angelo's fingers, of course. Jubilee gave him a dirty look.

He held up the can of root beer and shrugged. "Hey, you're not the only one whose powers have domestic applications. You should see me when we lose the TV remote."

Paige ignored him. When he wasn't busy sulking or trying to act cool, Angelo thrived on attention. "So," she said to Recall, "what's with this power of yours, anyway? Could you, like, find a lost dog?"

Dog Pound brightened and ran his hand over his bald head. "I can find lost dogs."

Paige smiled and shook her head. "You know what I mean.

Can you find things over a distance? Find things other people lost?"

Recall ran his finger around the top of his soda can, making patterns in the condensation. "I haven't really tried much over a long distance, but I think I could. They tell me my power's psionic, so all I need is some contact with the person who lost the thing. If I know them well enough, or if I talk with them and have them describe the thing, I can probably find it."

Paige smiled. "That must make you pretty popular. I only lose about fifty things a week."

Angelo leaned his head back against a heating duct and looked thoughtfully off into space. "When is the last time we saw that TV remote, anyway?"

Meanwhile, Everett had grabbed a pad of paper off a clip on the refrigerator and was furiously writing something down.

Recall smiled back at Paige. "My mom calls me about three times a week from Chicago to find something or another for her."

Paige's eyes widened. "Chicago? We're headed there. Through there, anyway, on our way home. Mr. Cassidy showed me the route we're taking on the way here."

Dog Pound leaned forward, elbows propped on knees. "So are we—Recall, Chill, and me. We were packing up tonight after the party and heading out."

"We're taking Dog Pound's car," explained Recall. "I'm going home for the summer, and Chill has a summer job at the cold storage warehouse my parents own. From there the Pound will go on home to Indiana. We thought a road trip would be da bomb."

Angelo leaned over to see what Everett was writing, and grinned when he figured it out. Jubilee moved closer so she too could see.

Paige finally got curious enough to ask. "Everett, what are you doing over there?"

He looked up. "Finding everything I've ever lost. The cool thing is, I can actually remember everything I've ever lost. Recall's power works on memories too."

Recall looked at Paige, puzzled.

Paige chuckled. "Everett's just trying your mutant ability on for size. It's what he does."

Everett stopped writing long enough to stare at the list, then

shot Angelo a look. "You know, about half of this stuff is in your room."

Paige grabbed Recall by the hand and pulled him toward the door. "Uh-oh, this could get ugly."

"And, Jubilee, look how much is in yours!"

Ivan quickly reeled in the cable, dragging the infiltrator with it. He'd heard enough, and it would not be wise to linger here too long. The boy who had let him in might come back to check, or he might confer with those in charge. Ivan was prepared to keep up his cover story with whoever came along, but the infiltrator would be difficult to explain.

He repacked his toolbox, locked the furnace room door behind him, walked up the alley behind the house and the remaining two blocks to where his car was parked.

Before picking up the phone, he checked to see that the tracer he'd attached to the limousine's frame was working. The tracer was a handheld unit with a flexible whip antenna. He pressed a button sending a "locate" pulse. The tracer answered with a strong ping. The tracer would transmit only when so instructed, greatly extending the transmitter's battery life, and making it especially difficult to detect. In the past he had constructed his own tracers, but this one had been purchased from the same catalogue as the infiltrator, and had been adopted for use throughout their organization. Their contacts across the country were equipped with similar locators, and could assist in tracking their quarry.

He adjusted the frequency dial and pressed the button again. A weaker ping. Another frequency, another weaker ping. These were the two transmitters his operatives had attached to the two motor homes the group had purchased. Now he would be able to follow any of their vehicles from a distance.

Ivan chuckled. "I love this country," he said.

He lifted the phone and dialed the Expatriate. "The young mutants are driving to points east, but they will be passing through Chicago. I believe this is only a coincidence."

"But a fortunate one. Actually, this is far better than I could have hoped. Are the tracking devices in place?"

"And tested. Our operatives will be able to locate them from a distance of fifty miles or more."

"Excellent. Leave your car at our south Seattle safe house,

then fly to Spokane and tend to the package. Another suitably equipped car will be waiting for you there. The package has to arrive in Chicago before these mutants, and the contents have to be in working order."

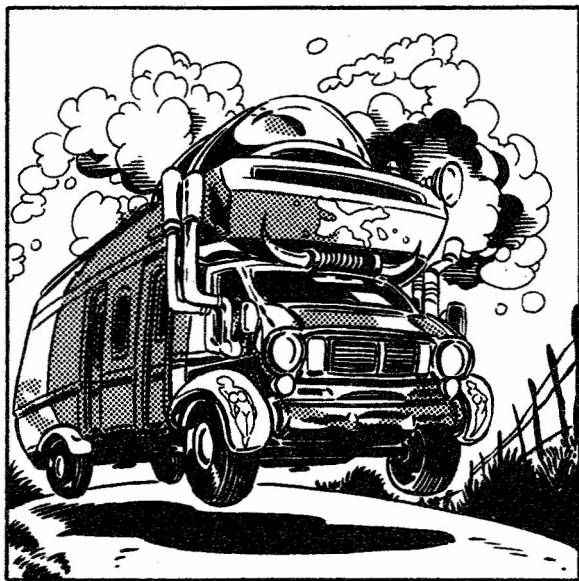
"That will not be easy."

"I have faith in you and your people, Ivan. You won't fail me."

"And when the package arrives?"

"Then we act. If these young mutants are cooperative enough to come to our adopted city, it is only appropriate that we arrange a little party for them. A shame they won't enjoy it as much as you and I will."

CHAPTER FOUR



MUTANT SAUCERS INVADE CLEVELAND
AS DUCKBOY SIGHTED AGAIN

ANSWER FIVE QUESTIONS AND FIND OUT
IF YOUR NEIGHBOR IS A MUTANT

STARLET SHOCKER: "I'M JUGGERNAUT'S LOVE CHILD!"

—*National Explorer* headlines

It was late afternoon before Generation X left the M.O.N.S.T.E.R. house, and the party was still going on. Their meeting concluded, Emma and Sean came upstairs to look for the students. They ran into Paige and Recall near the door and Recall simply told them where everyone else was hiding.

It was a trick Emma could have pulled off herself telepathically, but Recall's way was less intrusive and it gave the boy's ego a needed boost. Their talk with Chill had left her with some lingering sympathy for these mutant underachievers, and one didn't have to be a telepath to see how badly Recall wanted to impress Paige. There was no harm in his little crush, since Paige would soon be hundreds of miles away.

Jono, likewise, had found temporary companionship here. When they pulled him off the dance floor, he almost seemed grateful for the rescue. Emma wondered if Paige had caught this subtext, but decided it probably wasn't important. Though she'd never prohibited it, she wasn't sure she approved of relationships between the students. Such things had caused problems with the Hellions. If this created a little friction in their budding romance, then perhaps it was all to the good.

They found Monet sitting with the deejay, a goateed young man who seemed less interested in her than he was in the music. The rest were still having a private party in the kitchen.

Reluctant farewells were said, and the "M.O.N.S.T.E.R. Musketeers," as Jubilee had started calling them, promised to look for them on the road east. It was only then that Emma learned of the three M.O.N.S.T.E.R.s' impending trip. Emma realized that, given Recall's talents, his statement might carry more weight than it would have otherwise, but if Paige or any of the others had caught on to this, they didn't show it.

The limousine wandered south from the campus and returned to the freeway just in time to cross the floating bridge across Lake Washington. The students seemed fascinated by the miles-long ribbon of concrete that carried them only a few yards above the lake's choppy surface.

As for Emma, she scanned the east shore of the lake, lined with expensive homes nestled among evergreen and hardwood. Somewhere just north of the bridge was a rarely used mansion owned by Tony Stark. Emma had attended a party there some years before—uninvited, as she recalled—and had

picked up some useful business information that she had parlayed into several million dollars. That had been a strange time, full of glamor, parties, and beautiful people, but it had also been incredibly lonely.

Sean leaned back and studied her face. "Are ye all right, lass? Ye look sad."

"I was just wondering how life could have hurt so much when I'm one of the lucky ones. My mutation gave me power, wealth, the ability to fight back against those who would oppress me. How would it be to carry that stigma without the power to back it up?"

"Yer thinking about all the lads and lasses back at M.O.N.S.T.E.R."

She nodded, watching a small sailboat struggling against the chop. "When I lost the Hellions, I wanted to make amends, to help and protect the other mutant children of the world. But for every one we can help, there must be a hundred more out there, lost and adrift."

"I think you sell them short, Emma. Empowerment isn't about blasting through brick walls with your voice or controlling people like puppets. It's about strength of character, bravery, self-respect. Take that lad Chill. He knows the forces society has lined up against him, he can see the walls closing in, but he hasn't given up. He's standing with his people, forming alliances, keeping spirits up. Nah, he hasn't much of a mutant power, but that's not what makes him strong."

She rested the side of her head against the cool window, watching bridge supports flash by as they climbed to meet the lakeshore.

"But did we do anything for him today, Sean? Under his façade he was angry and bitter, and I don't blame him. Two of the X-Men helped start his organization, but what have we done to support it? We've been too wrapped up in larger concerns to give them the help they need."

"He knows what's going on, Emma. He may not be any happier about it than we are, but I think he understands. What we did today is let him know that they aren't forgotten, that they aren't alone, no matter how it may seem at times. If he seemed bitter, it was only because he could vent with us, tell us things he'd never dare tell his friends, or the members of his organization."

"That's our mission on this trip. For the kids it's a big adventure, but for us, it's to touch base with pockets of mutant support across the country, let them know that Charles and the rest of us haven't forgotten, that we still care."

She watched as the last of the big houses on the lakeshore went past, their blind faces isolated, unable to see what was really happening in the world around them. "Sometimes, Sean, I don't think we can care enough."

After crossing the lake and traversing a tangle of freeway interchanges, they arrived at the Frost Industries complex, a small campus of black-glass office buildings nestled among spruce trees. Emma could imagine the panic behind those dark reflective windows as the news spread that the owner was making an unannounced visit; in fact, thanks to her telepathic abilities, she didn't have to imagine.

The management and employees were doubtless relieved that, in the end, she came no closer than the parking lot, and would be equally puzzled when a series of memos, policy changes, and firings resulted in the coming weeks. The panic was causing company troublemakers, slackers, and ne'er-do-wells to broadcast like telepathic radio stations, and their malfeasance wasn't something she was prepared to ignore.

The recreational vehicles were waiting for them. Despite a fresh washing and a new coat of wax, the "Xabago" still looked to Emma like a Dumpster on wheels, and she was grateful the girls had shown better judgment. She felt a little sorry for Sean having to sleep in the thing, but only a little.

Sean raised an eyebrow when he spotted the white two-seater sports car that was now being towed behind the newer motor home, but said nothing. She'd put in the order while he'd been off inspecting the boys' monstrosity. "We'll need something for running our errands in," she explained. "We can't go dragging the kids and two forty-foot RVs along every time we have an appointment."

Sean agreed, and she suspected he quietly approved of her somewhat impractical choice of automobiles. Sean had a weakness for fast cars.

There was some surprise when, as they were preparing to leave, Jono asked to drive the Xabago. "I've got me license, and besides, I imagine Sean would rather ride with you—"

"—in the mobile X-mansion." Angelo chuckled. He

walked over and rapped on the fiberglass hood with his knuckles. "I christen thee," he announced loudly, "USS *Xtravagant*!"

Jono flashed him an annoyed look. As little of his face was left, his eyes could be quite expressive.

Sean looked on skeptically, but he was obviously searching for an excuse to take them up on their offer. "Are ye sure you can handle a rig that big, Jono? It's not as big as the other one, but—"

"Everett ran up a quick simulation on the Danger-boy. We've all been practicing."

"Jono," volunteered Angelo, "can jump his simulation over five parked buses."

Jono glared. "Shut up, Angelo. You aren't helping."

Angelo just cackled.

Sean considered for a moment. "Well, we've got a few hours of daylight left, weather's good, and after we get out of town, nothing but rural freeway ahead for a long while. I suppose there's no better time to try than now. Ye take the lead, and we'll follow."

"To keep an eye on you," mocked Angelo.

Jono and Sean turned to him at the same time. "Shut up, Angelo," they chorused.

Angelo sprawled in the passenger chair as only his mutant power allowed him to do, elbows propped on the armrests, and a tattered guidebook they'd found in a cupboard held in front of his face.

He glanced over the top of it at Jono, who seemed quite at home in the driver's seat of the Xabago, and if the incident at the airport was still bothering him, this at least seemed to be an effective distraction.

Everett had climbed into the observer's seat in the roof bubble and was happily watching the vista of lakes, trees, and mountains parade by. The seat was suspended from the ceiling by a network of welded steel tubes that incorporated a built-in adjustable footrest. The assembly put Everett high enough so that his chest was about level with the roofline, but from his seated position, Angelo could just look up through the bubble opening and see Everett's face.

By turning to his right, Angelo could look out through the

expansive windshield and see the same view, but rarely bothered. This whole Seattle thing bothered him. The place was too much like an overwatered L.A. with all the energy sapped out of it and all the edges rounded off. Now that they'd gotten out of the city and were headed through the Cascade Mountains to the east, it was even worse. It was too wet, too green, and too clean for his taste. He found the expanse of blue sky and craggy volcanic peaks in the distance oppressive. The high desert country they were headed into beyond the mountains might be a little more like his southern California home, but he wasn't counting on it.

Better even to bury his nose in a book. "Says here," he announced, "that they have moose in Yellowstone National Park. I've never seen a moose. 'Cept for that one with the squirrel, anyway."

"I have," said Everett, without looking down.

"You? Where? In St. Louis?" Angelo sniggered.

Angelo at least had the satisfaction of seeing Everett's annoying smile turn into a slightly annoyed frown. "St. Louis has a zoo, you know. But I saw the moose in Yellowstone."

He looked down at the map. Yellowstone was a long way from St. Louis. "You've been to Yellowstone?"

Jono glanced his way. "So, this is like a rerun for you?"

Angelo flipped through the book. "How about Mt. Rushmore?"

Everett nodded.

"Devil's Tower?"

"Yup."

"Chicago."

"Ya."

He flipped back a few pages. "Wall Drug. Bet you haven't been to Wall Drug."

"Uh-huh."

Angelo sniffed and put the book down in his lap. "What, did you get bitten by a radioactive travel agent?"

"Nah, it's just that we took a vacation every year. My folks didn't have a lot of money, but we'd all pack up our tents, camp stoves, and sleeping bags in the car and hit the road, traveling on the cheap, a different place every year. We came west a couple of times, even though I never saw Seattle before

this. We ate plenty of cut-rate hot dogs cooked over campfires, but we got to see a lot."

Angelo tossed the guidebook onto the dash. "I always suspected you of being a Boy Scout, but this confirms it. Tell you what, you can be our tour guide. Next time we stop, I'll see if I can get you a little hat and a megaphone."

Jono threw a map at him. "Ease off, Angelo. Just because you didn't have a bleeding perfect childhood is no reason to take it out on Everett."

Everett chuckled. "I can take care of myself, Jono. Anyway, no offense. Angelo is just being Angelo. But, if you could drown him out with some tunes, I'd be really, really grateful. I thought you guys were the ones who wanted the stereo."

Angelo nodded. "Sounds good to me." The stereo was beyond arm's length, but he stretched the skin on the fingers of his right hand out and snapped it on. They were in the middle of a commercial for some powder that claimed to cure jock itch.

Everett groaned. "Oh, man, I don't need to hear this before I eat. Change it."

Angelo reached for the tuning knob, turning it a hair to the right. An announcer identified this new station as being talk radio.

A bridge of bouncy piano theme music started, and a voice boomed from the speaker. "*Welcome back to this hour of The Walt Norman Show! Walt Norman, he's an earful for the everyman!*"

Angelo leaned forward to turn the knob again.

"Wait!" said Everett. "Turn it back."

Angelo growled up at him. "What? Thought you wanted to drown me out with tunes."

"I've heard of this guy. Let's listen for a minute."

Angelo realized that the guy on the radio, this Norman guy, he guessed, was saying something about mutants. "... *registering mutants is a good idea, yeah. I mean, if I have to register my little popgun, I guess somebody who shoots death rays out of his eyes shouldn't have a problem with that. But the reason the politicians want to register mutants is so they can round them up and use them against us. It's like, 'Hello, IRS hot line? I just want to ask... You know already? Form 1138. And—and, you know about that business trip to Vegas,*

that I didn't get any closer to the convention than the eighteenth green? But I... What? No, I have nothing against telepaths in the IRS. I do? Well, thanks for setting the record straight. Here, let me think something else for you. You get that? Yes, I did mean your mother." Several people could be heard laughing in the background. Evidently Norman wasn't in the studio alone. *"I'd say to give her my best, but then—I already did."* More laughter.

"Ladies and everymen, our producer, Trent McComb, who spins the dials and twists the wires that make it all happen. Trent, are you worried about them getting mutants in the IRS?"

The voice that answered was the same one that had announced the program. *"I thought they already were mutants, Walt."*

Laughter. *"I have to give him a straight line once a day,"* explained Norman drolly, *"it's in his contract."*

More piano music. Norman continued. *"And the melodious tones on the piano of Mrs. Dale, America's grandma."* Somebody played a tape of wild applause. *"Mrs. Dale, do you know about the mutant agenda?"*

What seemed to be a sweet voiced old woman answered. *"No, dear, but if you hum a few bars, I'll do what I can."* More laughter.

Angelo turned the volume down, but not off. *"That's the happiest bunch of bigots I've ever heard. I bet they'd be a real gas at a lynching."*

"Who is this blighter?" asked Jono. *"Is he in Seattle? If so, I'm glad we left."*

Everett leaned forward, so he could more easily talk with the others. *"You guys never heard of him? He's nationally syndicated. Really popular, I guess, depressing as that is."*

Jono shook his head. *"Never heard of 'im."*

Angelo sniggered. *"He don't play on those morose public radio stations you always listen to."*

Jono raised an eyebrow at him. *"Or that gang stuff you listen to either."*

"I have," Angelo said, *"eclectic tastes. Which do not include any station that would be caught downwind of this guy."*

Everett leaned back in his seat, gazed out at the scenery, and sighed. *"See what you've been missing?"*

• • •

Driving cross-country in Dog Pound's vintage pink Cadillac convertible had seemed like a cool idea when they'd first come up with it, but romantic notions had a way of crumbling on the open road. As they'd crossed the Columbia River into the dry, dusty wastes of eastern Washington, the reality of the Caddy's broken air conditioner had set in.

They were living, thought Recall, as he sprawled across the backseat dabbing blue zinc oxide on his nose, on sunblock and bottled water. He pulled out the little map book. The larger Washington/Idaho map had blown away when Dog Pound had tried to read it seventy miles back, and the detail in the smaller book left something to be desired.

He peered at the squiggle of narrow lines, and looked up skeptically at the two-lane road they were on. "Pounder, are you sure you read this map right? Shortcuts make me nervous. We could get lost out here and they wouldn't find our bleached bones until the next potato harvest."

"Famous potatoes," said Chill, from the driver's seat.

"I think so," said Pound. "I mean, it looked okay on the other map. Let me see that one again."

Recall handed him the map.

Chill looked in the rearview mirror and grinned. "Worried about missing your girlfriend, Recall?"

Recall hunkered down in the seat to avoid Chill's seeing the heat he could feel in his cheeks. "I'd like to see her again, yeah. You got a problem with that?"

Chill laughed. "Love hurts, m'man. But I'm an eternal optimist anyway. What does your secret inner compass tell us?"

Recall closed his eyes, thought of Paige, and tried to visualize where she was. He could clearly see the interior of the big RV, a bench seat at a dining table, matching curtains on the window, somebody's Captain America coloring book. (What was that about?) Outside the window, blank. "I've never really tried to use my power this way before." He held out his extended finger and moved it around like a dowsing rod until it was pointing over his shoulder and the back of the car. "I think we're getting farther away. Pound, are you sure this is right?"

"There's a freeway junction up ahead," offered Chill. "This has got to be I-90."

Recall frowned at Dog Pound. "Well, make sure we get on it going east, okay?"

Chill reached down to the seat next to him and pulled an aluminum can from its little plastic harness. As he held it up, a coating of frost formed on the outside. "Have a soda and cool off. We're back on track."

Recall took the can and held it gratefully against his forehead. He looked at the endless irrigated fields around them. Mobile sprinkler gantries sprawled across the landscape like giant metal centipedes, some of them spitting plumes of water with the force of fire hoses. "You think these are potatoes? I suppose, as Devo spud-boys, we should be thrilled."

"Famous potatoes." Chill repeated the slogan, which they had discovered on Idaho license plates even before crossing the line from Washington. "Sad when that's the biggest thing you've got to brag about." He seemed to notice something, leaned forward, and tapped his index finger against a gauge on the dash. "Pound, when's the last time this thing had its radiator looked at? We're running hot."

Pound looked blankly. "Radiator? That thing up front?"

Chill did a double take. "You drive a car twenty years older than you are, and you don't know anything about engines?"

Pound shrugged. "My dad bought this thing for me. He had one just like it in college, and said it was lucky for him. Me, I wanted a Lexus."

Chill stared at the gauge. "Maybe it will get better once we're on the freeway."

But it didn't. They got a few miles up the road before wisps of steam began appearing around the edge of the hood. They pulled onto the freeway shoulder and piled out. Pound stood, hands in pockets, kicking at bits of broken glass on the pavement, trying to ignore the whole thing.

Chill lifted the expansive hood and peered at the huge hunk of Detroit iron underneath. They were periodically blasted by dust and noise as an endless parade of semitrucks zoomed by. Steam hissed from around the radiator cap. "I could cool this down, but I don't want to risk cracking the block. Maybe if I do it slow?" He looked back over at Recall. "Hey, find us the nearest gas station."

"It doesn't work that way, Chill. I can't find it unless I

know about it specifically, or talk to somebody who does. None of us has ever been here before."

A grin slowly spread across Chill's face. "A lot of good you are," he said. Then he spun and hit Recall in the chest with a slush ball.

Recall howled as ice water soaked through his shirt and ran down his shorts. He grabbed a handful of the slush from his chest and threw it back at Chill. He caught a glimpse of Pound laughing at him, just as another slush ball slapped the other boy in the face.

Pound's laughter was cut off as about half of the slush went into his mouth. He choked, snorted, and laughed some more.

From behind the car, gravel crunched and popped as a vehicle pulled in behind them. Chill looked around the hood and waved his unfrozen hand to silence them. Pound just snickered at him, until he caught the concerned look on Chill's face.

Chill suddenly became aware of the slush ball in his other hand. He dropped it like a scorpion, and tried to shake off the frost that coated his fingers. A figure appeared around the far side of the car and leaned his elbow on the hood.

He was a tall, slender man in his twenties, deeply tanned, his hair trimmed so close to his skull that it was nearly impossible to guess what color it was, an indeterminate stubble. He wore his faded jeans and half-buttoned flannel shirt with sloppy indifference, and the too-big cowboy hat perched on his head uneasily, as though it might at any moment fall down around his neck. He smiled and there was the devil in it.

He glanced at Chill's still defrosting hand, but that only made him smile more. "You boys having some trouble today?"

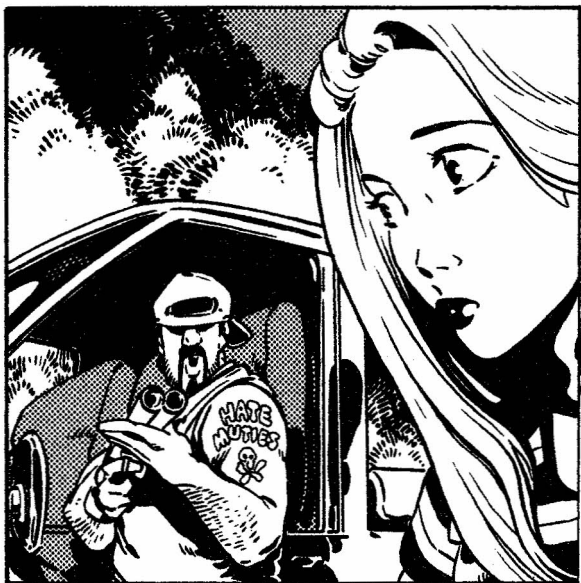
Chill jerked his hand behind him. "Just overheated. We'll be okay."

He never took his eyes off Chill. "I can see that—" he paused, savoring the word "—freak." He glanced back over his shoulder, then walked on around the car. "Oh, you got your trouble all right. You got your trouble right here." He made a fist and smacked it into the palm of his other hand.

Pound laughed nervously. He was built like the incredible Hulk's love child, but he was by nature a gentle soul, not much on fighting. "This guy's not so bad. We can take this guy."

But Recall barely heard him. He had stepped back to see the stake-side pickup truck parked behind them, and the half-dozen other young men climbing out of the cab and bed armed with farm tools and tire irons and all the meanness in the world.

CHAPTER FIVE



“Tomorrow on *Wake Up America*, meet author, musician, and heroic sidekick Rick Jones; Lesley Watt will show us how to liven up a summer party with her gelatin dessert creations; and pediatrician Dr. Wolfe Cody will tell us about a controversial new test that may detect some genetic mutations in the womb.”

—promo spot for WNN

The man known to those around him as Trent McComb sat in his broadcast booth, safe behind mirrored glass, master of all he surveyed. In the studio outside, the number three-rated talk-radio program in the country was being broadcast, and as he sat there, watching, fingertips pressed together in front of him, the entire thing was in his control.

True, he no longer ran the audio board, or played the sound effects. He'd turned those duties over to a full-time engineer nearly a year ago. And true, he no longer answered the phones, or screened the calls. Even if he'd wanted the job, the volume required three handpicked operators to handle it all. Then there was the publicist, the secretaries who handled all the mail, two writers, the talent assistants who kept what McComb privately called the "microphone meat" happy, and the bookkeeper who tracked all the money that just kept inexorably flowing in.

It was a large, no, a huge staff for a radio program, even a national one, and it was all under McComb's control, and the amazing fact was, it was only the tip of the iceberg.

McComb wasn't the star of the show, but he considered himself its master. And thus it was all the more upsetting to feel, even for a moment, the empire under his control suddenly slip away.

Through the monitor speaker, turned just to the point of audibility, he could hear "Mrs. Dale's" end theme music and his own prerecorded announcement closing the program. Through the glass, he could see Walt Norman give his cheerful sign-off and then angrily throw his headset across the room.

McComb reached over and clicked on the monitor microphone in Norman's studio. Norman was having another one of his tantrums, this one directed at the little studio beyond a glass partition where "Mrs. Dale's" piano was set up.

Norman stood up suddenly, causing his wheeled office chair to crash against the wall, and stomped toward the door that connected the two studios. He threw the door open as noisily as possible and stood in it, projecting anger with his body language.

"Ever the showman," muttered McComb, to nobody in particular.

"Listen to me, old woman, if you correct me on the air one more time . . ."

The woman sagged slightly on her piano bench, and pushed aside the boom that held a microphone near her face. "You gave out the wrong deadline for the contest. It's the fifth, not the fifteenth."

"I know what the deadline is. That isn't the point. You never, never correct me on the air."

McComb leaned over and turned on the intercom. "She's right, Walt. If we cut the contest on the fifth now, we're going to get complaints."

Norman turned and stared at the window. "Are you in there, Trent, or is this just another one of your blasted recorded messages? I hate that mirrored thing you've put in. Are you watching me for shoplifting or what?"

McComb pushed the talk button. "Walt, I'm just trying to keep things running properly—doing my job."

He scowled at the window. "What is your job around here, Trent? I don't know anymore. I don't even know if you're here half the time. At least she—" he jerked his hand toward the other studio "—plays the piano. Sure, I could replace her with a trained monkey, but at least she does something!"

McComb paused, getting his anger under control before framing a reply. Finally, "You hired her. She's your mother, Walt."

"Don't ever say that where someone might hear you. That's not public knowledge. She's just somebody who works here, just like anyone else. Without me, she wouldn't have a job, none of you would. You work for me, Walt, remember that. We came into this together, but that doesn't mean we have to go out that way."

McComb took a deep breath. Of course, he didn't work for Norman. Both of them worked for the network, and technically neither of them had seniority over the other. But McComb knew how to play the executives, who were increasingly concerned about Norman's temper tantrums, his on-air mistakes, and his ratings, which had been flat, even slightly declining, in recent months.

He watched as Norman stomped out, slamming the door after him. Betty Norman, known to the public only as radio's Mrs. Dale, gathered up her sheet music and made an orderly retreat. She paused in the door long enough to glance back at the window. "Thank you for standing up for me, Trent, but

he didn't mean any of it. I'm sure of it. He's a better person than you think.' But even she didn't sound convinced.

There was no doubt of who was in control of the show, but like those executives, McComb was concerned about Norman and the ratings. His plans would not be served by his being at the helm of a sinking ship. Norman was potentially expendable, but not at the expense of the show. McComb needed the show for now, and it would provide a useful cover for as long as he could keep it alive.

In the back of his mind, several diverse elements that had been circling each other for days started to close in tighter, taking on the form of a plan. He reached for the phone and punched up one of the WATTS lines. The phone rang several times before it was answered.

Though McComb was ninety-nine percent sure the line was secure, he changed his voice as he always did when adopting this persona, one that was more real to him than the lackey Trent McComb. "Ivan, this is the Expatriate. We must talk."

Recall sized up the situation, and it didn't look good. The local who had approached them first, apparently the leader of the group, reached down and unsnapped a scabbard on his belt, pulling out a sizable hunting knife. All the others approaching had makeshift weapons, a pitchfork, a tire iron, a baseball bat, a hunk of metal rod, a length of chain, a pipe wrench. The only good thing he could see about the situation was that there were no visible guns.

The leader looked them over, his gaze finally resting on Chill. "You're one of those mutants we hear about on the radio, aren't you, boy?" He glanced at the rest of them. "How about your buddies here? They muties too?" He held up the knife, turning it slowly so the sun glinted off the polished metal and into Pound's eyes. "You don't look like much. Wonder if any of you bleed green?"

This caused a round of laughter in his gang of thugs. The leader took a step toward Pound.

Pound bolted, running away from the highway toward a chain-link fence ten yards or so away. Two of the locals, Chain and Tire Iron, took off after him.

Recall looked frantically around for a weapon, but saw nothing. He knew that even if they hadn't been armed, he

probably wouldn't stand a chance against the larger thugs. The locals were between them and the car, and they had no place else to go that they couldn't be run down.

Chill didn't seem to be doing anything. Then Recall saw the slush balls forming in his friend's hands. This had barely registered when Chill spun into action, slinging the first slush ball unerringly into the leader's face. It was much larger and harder than the one he'd pelted his friends with earlier, and the impact threw the man's head back.

Dashing past him, Chill put the car between himself and the remaining thugs. He plastered another one in the face with his other slush ball, then jumped into the backseat of the Cadillac. The remaining thugs ran toward him, weapons swinging.

The leader was bent over, still blinded by the slush ball, trying to wipe out his eyes. His head strayed under the open hood. Chill made his move, leaping over the top of the front seats, bounding over the windshield, and bringing the hood down hard on the back of the leader's neck. The knife clattered to the asphalt.

Recall grabbed the fallen knife, the polished wood of the handle alien in his hand, the weapon frightening him almost as much as the men attacking them. The other three were trying to catch Chill, who had bounded back into the car to evade them.

He looked to see where Pound was. He'd made it halfway to the fence before being tackled. One of the thugs had grabbed the waistband of his pants and was using it to haul him backward. The pants pulled down just enough for Pound's tail to pop out.

"Tail!" Chain yelled, laughing as he did. "The freak's got a tail."

Recall started to go to his friend's rescue when something grabbed the back of his shirt and threw him onto the hood of the Caddy. He saw the leader's dripping wet face as he wrested the knife from Recall's hand, then tossed him off the hood like a used toothpick.

Chill was standing on top of the windshield frame, distracted by his predicament, when the pitchfork handle hit the back of his legs, making him fall. Before he could recover, one of the other locals had his neck pinned to the hood using the baseball bat.

Recall flinched as the leader marched purposefully toward him, knife held out, but then he moved past him, toward where Pound was now being held facedown in the dry grass. "So he's got a tail, huh? That'd make a right nice souvenir hanging from my rearview mirror!"

Chill yelled something unintelligible. Recall struggled to get his breath back, to do something, anything, to help his friends.

Then something big blew past, like one of the semis, but this something angled onto the shoulder just ahead of them and left four smoking black streaks on the pavement as it slid to a stop. The door of the stopped RV flew open, and Recall saw the three male students of Xavier's School jump out.

Another motor home pulled in behind them, making a more orderly stop. The door opened, and the three female Xavier students emerged, two walking, one flying.

Time seemed to slow as the six converged on the Cadillac. Pound and Chill were released as the locals focused their attention on the newcomers. The leader smiled, seemingly not too concerned that they were outnumbered. He looked first front, then back, tossing the knife from one hand to another as he did. "Well, well. Looks like we've got us a freak show and a babe fest. Either way, it's a party. Take 'em boys!"

The leader and three of the thugs went after the Xavier guys, the other three went after the girls, and it was obvious that this time they weren't pulling punches.

Pitchfork was the first to strike, stabbing the tines of his weapon into Jono's chest. The metal spikes penetrated a few inches into the fiery energy that was Jono's body before that energy recoiled, blasting off the business end of the pitchfork, which spun back to embed itself in the hood of the truck. The horrified local stood staring at the handle.

Recall glanced at the girls in time to see one of the thugs swing hard at Monet with the pipe wrench. She raised her hand and stopped the swing casually, the thug losing his grip on the wrench, which ended up in her hand. She casually bent the wrench until it snapped in the middle, then tossed it aside.

The guy with the baseball bat advanced on Jubilee, but before he could even swing, a shower of colored sparks shot from her fingertips, and the bat shattered into toothpicks.

Everett had latched on to Angelo's skin power, and was

busy wrapping himself around Chain and Tire Iron, who fell in a tangled heap to the gravel.

Angelo himself was advancing on the leader, who waved the knife threateningly. Angelo just smiled so hard it looked like his face would split. He didn't seem inclined to use his power at all, yet he didn't hesitate in his approach. "Mutant or no," he said, "don't ever, ever, pull a knife on a bad boy from the barrio." He dodged, stepped inside the leader's swing, expertly grabbed his wrist, and brought it down hard against his knee. The knife flipped through the air, where the skin of one of Angelo's fingers flicked out and caught it by the grip. The knife slapped back into his hand, as though by a rubber band. He held it up at the leader and laughed.

Pitchfork took a swing at Jono with the handle, but a beam of energy shot out of his chest, and the handle was instantly vaporized.

That left one thug, the one with the metal rod. He looked skeptically at the weapon, then at Paige, who was advancing on him. He tossed the rod aside and made a break for the truck. Paige ran after him. He managed to reach the truck and get the door open, but Paige was only a few yards behind.

Then things seemed to slow down even more as Recall saw him turn, saw the short, ugly barrel of the sawed-off shotgun come up behind the door's window, saw the glass explode as the shotgun spat fire and lead, saw Paige stumble back as the blast hit her, pieces of her blown away by the force of the blast.

Somehow he was on his feet, yelling some animal sound, running toward her as more pieces seemed to fall away from her body. And then he saw that she was tearing them way, exposing something as bright, polished, and hard as the knife blade that Angelo held in his hand.

Husk, he'd heard one of the other students call her, but he'd never imagined why.

She grabbed the edge of the door, effortlessly folding it forward against the fender of the truck, taking the gun from the cowering man and crushing it in her hand.

And then Recall was at her side, his hand on her shoulder, asking her if she was okay, even as she turned to him, her face like a statue of a goddess, and he realized how foolish the question was. And then she did the most devastating thing, a thing that nearly made his knees give way underneath him. That perfect metal face smiled.

• • •

Things were well over by the time Sean and Emma climbed down out of the larger RV and walked over to inspect the aftermath. Sean felt the touch of Emma's mind in his. *Emma, do you think we did the right thing letting the students handle this?*

Emma sent only the most imperceptible glance in his direction. *They handled themselves well at the airport. Besides, after what happened to Chamber, they were ready for some payback. Call it therapy.*

Sean bent to examine the remains of the shotgun.

Emma paused behind him. "That was sloppy of me. My only excuse is that even the ruffian didn't know what he was going to do until he did it. In any case, Husk handled it well enough."

Sean tossed the smashed gun onto the floorboard of the truck. "Let's clean this up and get out of here." He walked over to where Dog Pound was straightening his clothes. He seemed to have taken the worst of things. "Ye all right, lad?"

Pound nodded. "Got some bruises, but my dignity is hurt more than anything."

Sean gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "No need for that. Considering you were outnumbered and outgunned, ye lads did pretty well for yourselves."

Pound chuckled nervously. "Never a genogoth around when you need one." Pound seemed to suddenly notice that his tail was still hanging out, and quickly tucked it back into his pants, checking to see if any of the girls were watching. M and Husk hadn't noticed, and Jubilee was busy pretending not to.

Chill slid in close to Pound. "Pounder, I am really, really sorry for anything rude I ever said about your tail. 'Kay?"

Pound managed a half smile. "I knew you never meant anything by it."

Sean saw that Emma had the local lads dancing like puppets on her strings. They lined up by the road, blank expressions on their faces. Emma leaned in until her face was only a few inches from their leader, and a hint of awareness came back into his expression.

Emma's smile was grim and humorless. "You aren't going

to remember this, but you are going to have some exquisitely terrible nightmares for a long time to come."

Sean sighed. It was a shame they simply couldn't turn the boys over to the local law, but there was no guarantee how biased the closest sheriff or state trooper might be, and they'd probably have to return and testify in a trial to have even a hope of conviction. He could just imagine some defense attorney working over Jono or Angelo on the witness stand, fanning antimutant sentiments in the jury. It wasn't a pretty picture. Justice was not a concept well served on mutants these days.

No, this way was probably better, fairer, to everyone concerned. He considered the truck sitting empty behind the Cadillac, and realized that he could add a touch of his own.

Paige watched as Mr. Cassidy walked over in front of the locals' truck. He opened his mouth, and Paige heard a piercing sound, at a frequency barely audible to human hearing. He noticed Pound covering his ears. Then there was a muffled whump, and the truck's engine exploded as though someone had dropped a grenade in it. The hood flew in the air, flipped over twice, and landed upside down in the truck's bed. Pieces flew everywhere, a few landing in the highway, where they might have presented a hazard if Cassidy hadn't then taken care to blast each one off onto the far shoulder with a focused sonic blast.

Cassidy walked around the Cadillac to where Chill was closing the hood. "Is this thing drivable?"

Chill nodded. "I think it's cooled down enough. We should stop up the road and get some water."

Everett, overhearing, glanced at Mr. Cassidy. "I'll fill up a jug in our RV."

Cassidy nodded. "Do it, lad."

Paige ran her fingers over her left forearm, feeling the odd sensation of stainless steel skin. Her mutant abilities still amazed and frightened her sometimes, especially when she called on them so instinctively. It would be some time before she was able to husk back into her normal form.

She looked up and saw that Recall was staring at her. He'd acted so oddly after she'd been shot, she wasn't sure what to make of it. She wasn't sure what to make of him now.

He seemed to realize he was staring, and jerked his eyes away, but only for a moment. His cheeks reddened.

She suddenly felt embarrassed, too, though her transformed body didn't so readily show it. "I'm sorry. Does this bother you?"

Recall looked surprised. "Bother? N-no. It's just—" The words seemed to hang in his throat. "It's just that, looking at you like this, you're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Paige was completely taken aback. She'd had many reactions to her transformations in the past, ranging from shock to respect to horror, but this was the first time anyone had ever called her beautiful.

Recall looked at her, seemingly unsure what to do next. Then he seemed to get an inspiration. He reached up and fumbled with his collar. He removed a small enameled pin, the sign of the six-fingered hand. He presented the pin to her. "I want you to have this. It's a M.O.N.S.T.E.R. pin—my M.O.N.S.T.E.R. pin, actually."

She let him drop the pin into the palm of her hand, but didn't draw her hand back. "Recall, I really can't take this. It's just too, well, personal."

He waved his hand in dismissal. "I have a box of them on the dresser at home. Giving one is considered a sign of friendship. Some people say they're good luck."

She considered the pin. "Well, in that case . . ." She smiled and closed her hand over the pin, drawing it to her chest. "Thank you, Recall. I'm touched."

She noticed Jono watching them from beyond the Cadillac. She thought about saying something, explaining things to him, but then she thought of the genogoth back at the M.O.N.S.T.E.R. house. *Let him sweat a little. Besides, Recall is awfully sweet.*

She walked away from where Jono stood, and saw Angelo marching back in front of the row of now-terrified locals as Monet watched from the sidelines. As Paige walked closer, she could hear him talking.

"What I want to know before the nice mutant lady wipes your brains out like dirty ashtrays, is how did a bunch of Idaho bumpkins like you find out about mutants, much less learn to hate them?" He turned abruptly and put himself nose-to-nose with the leader. "Huh, spud-boy?"

The leader's lips trembled, but the words were a while coming. "R-radio. Walt Norman on th'radio."

Angelo's face went stone cold serious and he stepped back, turned, and walked away without a word.

Its radiator refilled, the Cadillac was purring again as the Musketeers roared down the interstate. Recall sat sideways in the backseat, thinking of Paige, wishing he was with her.

Mr. Cassidy had offered to let them caravan with the two RVs, but macho pride had taken precedence over common sense. No, Chill had said, they'd be fine, and Pound and Recall had backed him up. Now, sulking the miles away, Recall couldn't imagine what sort of madness had possessed him. "We should have stuck with the Xavier crew."

Pound shrugged and nodded.

"Maybe you're right," said Chill, "but it's too late now."

Recall considered for a moment, then used his power to feel for the two RVs. It was much easier this time, and he realized that it was easier to track the big vehicles at a distance, rather than the people inside. He was starting to get the hang of things. "Maybe not. I think I can keep us close without getting us too close."

Chill held up his right fist in mock triumph. "Plan," he announced.

Pound chuckled. "No telling when they'll need us to get them out of trouble again."

CHAPTER SIX



[piano music under vocals]

"Mrs. Dale."

"Yes, Walt?"

"Did I tell you my neighbor once had a mutant dog?"

"No, Walt, I don't think you did."

"It was so ugly, they had to shave its butt and walk it backwards!"

[sound of snare drum and canned laughter]

"Mrs. Dale."

"Yes, Walt."

"How do you tell if there's been a mutant in your refrigerator?"

"I don't know, Walt."

"Easy, just look for flipper prints in the butter!"

[snare drum and more laughter]

—transcript from *The Walt Norman Show*

Ivan glanced down at the screen of the laptop computer resting on the passenger seat next to him. The narrow lane-and-a-half road looked as though it hadn't been repaved in decades and seemed as if it might dead-end straight into a tree trunk around every curve, yet the map screen assured him he was right on course. He topped a small rise and the trees thinned, allowing him to see a collection of corrugated metal buildings clustered around an ancient military hangar, vintage army markings just barely visible in its peeling paint.

Though there had been no sign of guards or lookouts, indeed no signs of life at all, the huge doors at the end of the hangar rolled open just enough to beckon him inside. As he drove through, the hangar seemed dark and empty, but then he recognized the heavy velour blackout curtain that spanned the width of the hangar just a few yards inside. He pulled to a stop as the doors rolled closed behind him, and a pair of heavily muscled men lifted the bottom of the curtain enough for his car to pass.

He pulled his car into a line of closely parked cars and trucks, doubtless belonging to the technicians and workers here. He climbed out and inspected the scene before him. Though from the outside the building looked abandoned, inside it was a buzz of activity.

Stacks of wooden crates were tended by burly workers, a pair of forklifts, and omnipresent guards armed with assault rifles. Stencils on the boxes indicated countries of origin all over the world, Russia, China, South Africa, Latveria, Israel, Genosha, Transabal. Some also indicated the contents: rifles, ammunition, grenades, rockets, flares, mines, bombs, energy weapons, body armor—a one-stop shopping center for mass destruction.

This was their bread and butter, Expatriate and he. From this and other covert storage and distribution points around the country, as well as in Mexico and Canada, they maintained an ever-growing trade in arms and military hardware, and business was booming. They found no shortage of customers, both those in the country desiring weapons, and foreign interests wishing to obtain advanced U.S. technology. Many of their customers were from the former republics and satellite countries of his own Soviet Union. They catered especially to rev-

olutionaries, terrorists, militia groups, even the occasional "super-villain" seeking hardware too dangerous for conventional purchase, yet too mundane to have specially constructed.

But his main interest today was in the semitrailer parked in the middle of the hangar, surrounded by generators and compressors, its back door open, a tangle of hoses and cables connecting it with the outside world. This was the package, a very unusual shipment intended not for sale, but for their own special use.

Eager as he was to see the contents of that truck, he waited patiently a few feet from his car, hands in plain view, as one of the armed guards and a short woman in a lab coat approached him. He recognized the woman; in fact, he had hired her into the organization himself. Still, he did not complain as the guard carefully compared his picture with one on his clipboard before nodding in recognition and putting away his weapon.

He tried to recall the woman's name. Bervin. Yes, that was it, Dr. Frances Bervin. He watched her from behind as they walked, the heels of his dress shoes clicking on the concrete as everyone around him moved silently on sneakers or tennis shoes. She was broad hiped, a little stout, salt-and-pepper hair worn in a tight bun, wire-rimmed glasses propped on her forehead.

She might have been mistaken for a PTA mother except for the glint in her eye that had initially interested him in her. He saw it whenever a technical challenge was thrown at her, and it was never dimmed in the slightest by conscience or any ethical dilemma. She had a passion for her work, and had little or no concern for how it was applied. He liked that in his people.

He could see the interior of the truck as they rounded the end of it. From the outside it appeared to be a conventional refrigerated trailer, down to the chain grocery store logo painted on the sides, but inside it was a high-tech workshop in the making. One side of the truck had been lined with polished white workbenches, which were now being outfitted with electronic test and assembly equipment. The front of the truck formed a compact but reasonably complete machine shop, with heavier hand and power tools. But all this existed

to serve the row of tarp-covered objects that lined the other wall of the trailer.

There were seven of them, each draped with blue canvas held on with nylon straps. Each was about seven feet tall, vaguely human shaped in a wide, slope-shouldered sort of way, held upright in individual service gantries bolted to the floor.

Ivan climbed a set of folding metal steps into the truck. It smelled of ozone, hot metal, and melted plastic. He put his hand on one of the wrapped forms, feeling the reassuring solidity of metal underneath. "I expected them to be bigger," he said.

Dr. Bervin stepped in beside him. "Most of the series are. These are covert models, designed for stealth, speed, and operation in close quarters. Street fighters, not walking tanks."

"They seem reasonably complete. Why the delay?"

Bervin laughed harshly. "If I took these tarps off, you would see these are only stripped-down chassis. Most of the electronics, the power supplies, the servo-actuators, the weaponry, are being worked on in our shops while we finish outfitting the truck. We'll continue to work on them all during the trip east."

She walked down the line of shrouded machines, touching each one gently as she passed it. "None of the units was complete when we received it. What we got were 'spare parts,' written off of official inventories one by one, the stripped-down hulks of a dozen units, from which we figure we can finish these six. Even then, there will be some variations in functionality and armaments."

Ivan frowned and jammed his hands in his pants pockets. That was not the package as it had been sold to him, but then, he'd suspected that the Transabal revolutionaries he'd been dealing with had been less than truthful with him, and there had been little opportunity to inspect the units without attracting official attention.

Bervin watched his reaction with great interest. "Never fear. These units will function, and function well. Just don't expect them to operate at factory specs. Given more time, I could likely fabricate the missing parts, perhaps even offer some upgrades, but—" she shrugged "—the Expatriate has put us on a strict timetable."

He met her eyes, and she did not flinch. "Do not expect any flexibility in that schedule either, Doctor. In fact, do not be surprised if it is pushed up. As much as possible, prioritize your efforts to have as many units operational as soon as possible, rather than having all completed at once. And most of all, we will need one unit to operate to full specs, and we will need it ready quickly, to allow for the cosmetic modifications that we require."

Bervin leaned back against the workbench, allowing a workman toting a welding torch to move past her. "You ask a great deal."

"I ask nothing. The Expatriate demands. Do not fail him."

"I have no intention of letting our mysterious leader down. I can shuffle enough parts to make one unit with all the bells and whistles, and I can make it the first one we complete."

"Make it the second one. I wish you to make your mistakes, do your learning, on the first. This unit must be perfect."

"How soon then?"

"Five days."

That harsh laugh again. "Absurd. What you ask is impossible."

Ivan felt his features harden into what one of his KGB associates had once termed *the killing face*. He stepped closer to her, and this time, she did flinch. "You disappoint me, Doctor. We have spent much, gone to considerable trouble and risk, to smuggle this package back into the country, and we have so little to show for it."

"Five days," she said, relenting. "I can promise you the two units in seven days. The others I can have in ten to twelve days, though there may be compromises."

He stepped closer again. A forklift loaded with crates stopped behind the truck, casting the interior into shadow. "I am troubled, Doctor. What assurances do I have that you can make these units functional at all?"

"Admittedly, the technology is unusual, challenging. This is not like adapting a Stinger missile to Russian guidance radar, or converting an aircraft Gatling gun for antipersonnel use. But I had anticipated your concerns, and prepared a little demonstration for you."

His eyebrows rose, the killing face fading. "Demonstration?"

She took advantage of his change of mood to slip past him, gesturing him to follow. They climbed down out of the truck and she led him around the stacks of warehoused crates, through another set of blackout curtains, and through a small door in the back of the hangar.

The sunlight hurt his eyes as they crossed a few yards of gravel walkway to a small metal shed that might have once hangared a single light aircraft. She unlocked another door, and they stepped back into cool darkness, the air inside damp and musty. He heard a switch click, and a row of fluorescent tubes in the ceiling flickered reluctantly to life.

At one end of the enclosed space, several sawhorses had been set up to create a crude test stand. On the floor, a large power supply was connected to a wall outlet, and to the test stand by a pair of finger-thick black cables. There, an array of electronics was spread out in crude, breadboard fashion and in the center of it sat a polished object, slightly tapered toward the rear, open muzzle pointed out toward the front wall.

Without explanation, she turned on the power supply. There was a hum, and a whine so high pitched that he could barely hear it. She flipped another switch, and the sliding doors at the front of the building rolled back.

Again, the sunlight blinded him, and he shielded his eyes for a moment with his hand, but when he took it away, he could see the parking apron of the abandoned airstrip outside, and on it the stripped hulk of an old twin-engine airplane, motors missing, windows smashed, tires flat on the cracked concrete. Though smaller than a modern airliner, it was not a light plane. A vintage DC-3 airliner, he thought, the famous Gooney Bird. "What is this?"

The doctor smiled at him. "A target." She fished a key from her pocket, placed it into a switch on the breadboard, and turned it. A row of indicator lights glowed green. She pointed at a large red push button near the butt end of the silver cone. "Do the honors."

He placed his finger over the button, then looked at the plane parked outside. "What can I expect?"

"This is an electromagnetic constrictor device. The effects are spectacular, yet controlled and closely contained as suits the design of these units. As I said, they are designed for surgical, close-in strikes."

"Recoil?"

"None. This is a directed energy weapon."

He pushed the button. There was no recoil, though the unit bucked slightly, and he felt his watch pull against his wrist. A beam of energy lanced out from the muzzle, green with arcs of blue electricity that spread over the plane like tiny snakes, a nest of baby constrictors after a single huge meal. Then the plane contracted, crumpled like a soda can being crushed by an unseen hand into a central point in the air, until the glow winked out and the mass of metal, now little bigger than a minivan, fell to the concrete with a crash.

He nodded. "Impressive, but our targets are flesh and blood."

She smiled her poisonous smile and waved off his concern. "This is less effective on nonmetal objects, but I suspect that none of your targets is as large as an airliner either. Besides, we'll have a whole arsenal of surprises ready to keep them entertained." She touched the barrel of the weapon gingerly, and he realized that it was hot. "I don't envy them."

He nodded, satisfied. Suddenly he was anxious to get on with business. "Proceed, then. There are other preparations to be made. In Wyoming, you'll rendezvous with our special-effects man. He will need access to your best unit, to make measurements and take casts of the shell. It is important that you be ready for him."

She looked confused. "Special-effects man? Do you mean that literally?"

"The best that we could hire away from Hollywood." He chuckled as he headed for the shed's door. "How else do you expect that we will build a mutant?"

Angelo scratched the stubble on his chin and watched as Everett draped a hammock across the high observation chair that they'd come to call the top-gun seat. He had arranged the hammock in such a way that one could sit in the seat and have one's feet and legs supported by the lower end of the hammock.

Angelo sniffed. "You sure you want to sleep up there, Roger Ramjet? We got plenty of room on the sofa bed."

Everett finished tying the last knot and slung himself into the seat experimentally. He squirmed a little, looking for the

most comfortable position. "You kidding me? This is the best bed in the house." He tapped the Plexiglas dome over his head, looking up at the blue sky only now beginning to darken with sunset. "Sleeping right under the stars, waking up to the first morning light. What's better than that, huh?"

Angelo just shook his head and chuckled. "Were you bitten by a radioactive Boy Scout, or what?"

Jono sat in the driver's seat, swinging it back and forth on its swivel, a pair of headphones covering his ears. He glanced up at them curiously, then went back to his listening.

There was a tapping at the door, and it opened a crack. "You boys decent in there?" It was Paige's voice.

"For you, *chica*, I could be much better than just decent."

Paige pushed on through the door, an annoyed look on her face. Monet and Jubilee followed close behind. Paige and Jubilee sprawled on the couch. Monet sat cross-legged on the recliner.

Angelo pretended to ignore them, digging through the small fridge for a soda. He found a can he liked, pulled it out, and popped the top. He took a deep swallow before turning his attention back to the girls. "To what do we owe this visit from the great castle on wheels? Our Xabago is your home."

Paige was not amused, or wasn't showing it if she was. "Serious powwow, Angelo. We want to ask you a question."

Angelo took another swig from the can as he considered. Not, "Can we ask you a question?" Whatever they wanted, Paige wasn't about to let it slide by, and that *chica* could be as stubborn as the hills she was born in. Might as well get it out of the way. "Sure," he said, "give me your best shot."

But it was Jubilee who asked the question. "When you were grilling the bib-overall battalion today, you asked them where they got their mad-on for mutants. They said something about the radio, something about a guy named Norman, and you freaked. Why?"

Angelo felt a dent in his machismo, and pulled himself indignantly up to his full height. "I did not 'freak.'"

Paige stood up too, her arms cross defiantly across her chest. "I saw it too, Angelo. I may not have a photographic memory, but I remember well enough. Norman was the name."

Jono seemed to have tuned in on the conversation. He swung around toward them and took the headphones off, set-

ting them in his lap. Tiny, unintelligible voices could be heard from the earpieces.

Everett looked down from his perch, making eye contact with Angelo. Angelo turned to see that Jono was staring at him too. So were the girls. He felt his too-large skin tighten involuntarily. "So, yeah, I got a little stressed. Is there a problem with that?" He tapped his chest with the fingertips of both hands. "You try looking like me, you'd get a little stressed too."

Paige just locked eyes with him. "You're holding out on us, all of you guys. Tell me, Angelo. Why?"

Before Angelo could say anything, Jono interrupted him. "There's a taped repeat on one of those high-power AM stations in the Midwest. I just got it tuned in." He reached over and tugged the headphones out of the jack. Suddenly the voice of Walt Norman was coming at them from all twelve speakers, immersing them in his thinly veiled hate.

It was night and the two-lane road was empty. At times like this, Ivan liked to roll the windows down, turn the radio up loud, and drive until he could hear the tires scream for mercy on the curves. His preference was for classical music; he could not stand the American forms of country or rock and roll, but there were no appropriate stations in this wilderness, and while the car had been fully equipped in other ways, the only tapes he found in the vehicle were of the despised rock. And so he found himself listening, for the first time in a while, to *The Walt Norman Show*.

While Ivan applauded the antimutant tone of the show, he had little stomach for anything else about it. In his opinion, Norman was a buffoon, a useful clown and nothing more. That he should consider himself superior to his fellow humans, especially one so capable as the Expatriate, was laughable. He was uncertain how the man known to the world as Trent McComb could stand this charade.

Then he heard the Expatriate's voice, not as he normally heard it on the phone, but booming and jovial, introducing a commercial for some itch powder, another useless product of American decadence. *What a country this is, seductive one moment, repugnant the next*. But no matter how he rationalized its weakness, there was no doubt that it had toppled his be-

loved Soviet Union. That was a transgression he could never completely forgive, his unending reason to use the country's ways against itself, to bedevil it from within in every way possible.

As for the Expatriate, his hatred was more focused. The Americans had wrecked his homeland of Genosha as well, driven him into exile—but not the United States as a whole, just a few of its denizens, the mutants known as the X-Men. They were out there even now, hidden in the darkness like rats, but they could not hide from the Expatriate's wrath, not when he could reach the minds of millions of their countrymen, fanning their hatred of mutants, then using that engine of media hatred for a second purpose, providing arms to terrorists and antimutant groups.

There was a sweet justice to it all that made the buffoon on the radio almost bearable. But only almost. He reached over and snapped off the radio, leaving him with only the road and the darkness.

Angelo reached for the radio knob. The girls had been listening to the Norman show for almost an hour, more than enough to get the flavor of the thing. As for Angelo, he wondered if he'd ever get the bad taste out of his mouth.

But Paige grabbed his hand and pulled it back. "Wait!" The announcer was giving the numbers for the listener call-in line, and Paige dug through the clutter on the counter until she found a felt-tip pen and a napkin she could write on. She jotted down the toll-free number.

Angelo poised his hand over the radio knob again. "Now?" She nodded. "That's enough for now."

Angelo clicked the radio off and settled back into the passenger-side front seat. "So, there you have it."

Monet looked up at Angelo. "He's not a very nice man."

"Perceptive," said Paige, a sarcastic edge on her voice.

"Well," she insisted, "he isn't."

Paige shook her head in exasperation. Monet was difficult to figure out sometimes.

Angelo leaned forward in his seat and looked at the napkin that Paige clutched tightly in her hand, but it was Jono who expressed his unspoken question.

"You aren't thinking about calling this blighter, are you?"

Paige glanced up at him and held her gaze for a moment before answering. "I'm thinking. Just thinking."

CHAPTER SEVEN



“The President, seen here at a fund-raising dinner in Texarkana, Arkansas, again denied that the White House is considering new measures to control mutant terrorism. The President will remain in Texarkana for several days of golf, and to participate in a fun run with local celebrities. The event will benefit children’s charities. In other news, curfews in Dayton have been rescinded and National Guard patrols withdrawn as the ‘mutant panic’ seems to have subsided. Dayton’s mayor has formed a citywide task force to study the mutant problem, and to plan a firm and organized response should an actual mutant threat ever strike the city.”

—excerpt from WNN news report

Everett was riding in the top-gun seat again. At times it seemed to Angelo as though they'd never get him down from there again, especially now that they were climbing into the mountains of Montana. From where he was stretched out on the sofa, Angelo could see Everett grinning, his eyes constantly scanning the horizon as though he didn't want to miss a single scenic beer can.

As for Angelo, he wasn't much impressed. Some old movie director had once said, "A tree is a tree, a rock is a rock, film it in Griffith Park." That pretty much summed up Angelo's philosophy of things too. Of their little group, only Monet seemed less impressed with the scenery than he was. For him, the trip had seemed mainly a chance to sack out, listen to some cuts on his Walkman, play with the Danger-boy, and hang out with the guys, all of which had taken a left turn when they'd discovered Walt Norman's show.

Listening to the program had, by some unspoken consensus, become a daily ritual for them, finding it on the dial an obsessive pursuit. The amazing thing was, they always did find it, sometimes on a powerhouse station in the early evening, sometimes on a farm-town station with less wattage than the Xabago's preamp. Angelo had the odd feeling that Norman had always been there, in the air, waiting to be plucked out, just as his mother had always told him that the devil was waiting for your weakest day.

Angelo tried to close his eyes and relax, but Jono was running through the dial again, scanning for Norman like some Tom Clancy sonar operator, little bits of sound from dozens of stations coming out of the speaker like sausage from a grinder. Finally, he sighed and swung his feet down onto the floor, cluttered with magazines and fast-food wrappers. "We've got to clean this place up." He carefully kicked an empty pop can up into the sink. "One of these days."

A warbling electronic chime came from somewhere around his feet. At first he couldn't identify it, then it came again.

"Phone's ringing," said Everett from his perch.

Angelo kicked aside a stack of magazines. "I hear it, scenery boy." He doubled over and tried to peer under the front of the couch. "When did we get a phone?"

Everett gave him a perplexed look. "First day out, when

we stopped for dinner in Spokane. Same time they gave us the image inducers."

"Image inducers?"

"The holographic image inducers, so you and Jono can go out in public without attracting attention."

Angelo lifted a cushion and peeked under it. "Where was I when this was going on?"

"Right there, stuffing your face with taquitos and rice."

He spotted the phone's antenna poking out of an athletic shoe and grabbed it. "That would explain it, then. Those were the best taquitos I've had since leaving the barrio."

Everett chuckled. "Angelo, don't you listen to anything Sean and Emma have to say?"

He stared at the phone looking for a talk button. "Sure. When they call us to eat." He figured out how to turn on the phone and held it to his ear. "*¡Hola!*" He listened for a minute, then hung up. "Hey, Jono, Emma wants us to stop at this rest area coming up."

Jono glanced at him skeptically. "What bloody for? They not only got plumbing in the Xtravagant, they got gold fixtures in that thing."

Angelo shrugged, tossed the phone on the couch next to him, and slouched back to wait. Jono pulled in next to a semi-trailer with STARK/FUJIKAWA painted on the side in six-foot red letters. The Xtravagant was already there, parked a few spaces over.

They'd barely stopped rolling when their door flew open. Paige, Jubilee, and Monet filed in. "Knock-knock," said Paige.

Angelo nodded. "Whassup?"

Paige smiled. "We're riding with you guys for a while."

Angelo allowed his cool to slip just enough to raise an eyebrow. He noticed that Jono was leaning on the steering wheel, trying to ignore Paige and still look casual about it. Angelo slid over so Paige and Monet could sit down. Jubilee leaned on the kitchen counter.

Monet was studying the interior of the Xabago with obvious distaste. She picked up the cell phone and held it to her chest like a protective talisman.

Angelo wiped the stubble on his chin. "Yeah. Why?"

"We missed you," said Jubilee.

"They kicked us out," corrected Paige. "Actually, they kicked M and Jubilee out. They've been bickering for the last sixty miles. I just wanted to hear that Norman geek again."

"Tune seven-sixty AM," said Jubilee. "Me and M heard the announcement while Sean was changing stations a while back. He rules that radio with an iron hand."

Paige shot her a look of annoyance. "Sixty miles back?"

She shrugged.

Paige looked from her to Monet and back. "You guys were arguing on purpose?"

Monet said, "We all do what we do best."

Jubilee inspected her fingernails carefully. "Besides, it was a plan to get us kicked out of the Xtravagant so we could listen to the show."

"You want to let me in on the plans from now on? You guys were making me bug crazy."

"Tune the radio," insisted Jubilee.

Paige glanced at her watch. "We have a few minutes, if I didn't miss a time zone."

Angelo glanced forward. "Do it, Jono, and let's get rolling." He figured he was doing Jono a favor, giving him an excuse to ignore Paige, and something to distract him while he was ignoring her.

Jono tuned the radio to a station that seemed to feature hog prices on the hour and half-hour. The Norman show wasn't on yet, so he turned the volume just below the level of annoyance.

The Xabago started to roll, and Jubilee grabbed the edge of the fridge to hang on.

Everett noticed. "You want to ride up here? The view's great."

"Is there room for two?" Jubilee winked.

Everett's mouth hung open awhile before he could answer. Then he fumbled with his seat belt. "I don't think there is," he almost whispered. "I'll make room for you." He jumped down.

She smiled at him as she climbed up.

Everett fell into the recliner gratefully, like someone who'd just had a brush with great danger.

Angelo rolled his eyes and sighed. Was the whole world love crazy? He noticed Monet sitting demurely, staring at him.

He pointed an accusatory finger at her. "Don't you start!"

She smiled in response, but only a little, not enough to completely take him off the hook.

It was probably intentional, knowing Monet, much as anybody knew Monet. He was sure she didn't suffer fools well, and that most days all of them were on her fools list.

He sighed again. Nobody was talking, and it was time to change the subject. "Why are we doing this—listening to this Norman guy? So he doesn't like us, and he's never even met us. That's true of lots of people. Most people, maybe. So what's the attraction?"

Paige locked eyes with him. "Know thine enemy."

Jubilee snorted. "And he is a doof."

Everett wasn't laughing. "He's a doof who's on, like, every radio station in the country. So the message is sugarcoated, what difference does that make? Maybe that just makes it worse." He crossed his arms. "I mean, evil mutants, Sentinels, those are things you can fight. How do you fight a lame joke on the radio?"

"He frightens me," said Monet.

Angelo blinked. That got everyone's attention. Monet was plenty of things, annoying, arrogant, haughty, but she was usually solid as a rock against any threat.

"Somebody," she continued, "should make him stop."

"Freedom of speech," said Everett.

Paige nodded. "The First Amendment."

Angelo chuckled. "First thing the Founding Fathers did, right after kicking the tea drinkers out." He saw Jono glaring at him in the rearview and laughed again.

Jubilee scanned the horizon from her high perch, tapping her index fingers together nervously in front of her, making tiny sparks as she did. "Well, you can bet that if there was a mutant radio show, like if old Charlie Xavier had a show, they'd find a way to shut him down."

Angelo nodded. "I've heard that all-men-are-created-equal line, but the LAPD taught me early on that some are equaler than others."

Everett frowned at him. "It's not about what they would do, it's about what they should do. I mean, we could march into this guy's station and make it into a crater. We've got the power. So, should we do it?" He looked them all over, waiting

for a response. Angelo thought about saying something, but held his tongue. Nobody else spoke up.

Jubilee looked down at them, an annoyed expression on her face. "So that's it, huh? We just let the slime go on spreading his—" she groped for a word "—slime!"

Everett jumped toward the radio. "Hey, it's started!"

They'd been so busy talking that they hadn't noticed the opening. Jono reached over and turned up the volume. The announcer was speaking. "*—is a toll-free call. Remember, Walt Norman wants to hear from you, the Normans of America and the world at large. If something's on your mind, call Walt. It's not his fault! But he'll listen to you gripe anyway. And now here's the man with the plan, Walt Norman!*"

Paige looked at them each in turn. "It's just words, and how do you fight words? With words, that's how."

Angelo grinned. "Nice idea *chica*, but he's on the radio and you aren't, so unless you got a radio station hidden in your pocket . . ."

She did reach into her pocket, her jacket pocket to be exact, and pulled out a crumpled napkin. Angelo recognized it and groaned. "Don't do it, *chica*. Don't do it."

She flattened the napkin out on her leg, studying the number written there.

"Don't do it," he repeated. "They screen the calls on those things. They'll never put you on."

She held out her hand. "Monet, give me the phone."

Angelo flopped back in the couch. "Oh, man."

The Expatriate sat in his control booth, only slightly paying attention to the program. The operators were handling the calls, the engineer was handling the program, and most of his announcements for the program were prerecorded. Of course, he might have to occasionally banter with Norman, but generally the host initiated these segments. Otherwise, Norman preferred to hog the microphone unless the format called for him to do otherwise.

He glanced at the clock. Norman was through his opening monologue, his news-of-the-day rant, today's aimed at the President's lack of action on mutant terror, and the opening joke exchange with Mrs. Dale. They were coming up on the half-hour news break. He'd have to make happy talk with

Norman about it after it was over, which meant that he'd have to at least listen to the news.

Until then, his attention was focused on a computer screen, and business that had nothing to do with radio. An e-mail message directed him to the alt.conspiracy.galactus newsgroup on the Internet, where he downloaded a picture file. He displayed the picture, taken from New York's Central Park, with an out-of-focus blob visible in the cloudless sky.

Somewhere, he knew, drooling idiots were trying to find alien invaders in that blob, but it actually contained encrypted digital data. He used his mouse to put a box around the blob, pushed a button, and the picture was replaced by an inventory list. Stinger missiles, EMP projectors, antipersonnel mines, microturbine engines. Currently on a fishing boat out of Argentina, but with a click of his mouse they would be transferred to a freighter bound for Central Africa.

He opened another window on the screen to check his Swiss accounts and verify that all the funds were in place, then pressed the button that would convert his instructions into another blob of light. This was automatically inserted into another picture of empty sky, and uploaded to the newsgroup. An e-mail was also sent that would instruct his contacts where to pick up the picture.

He leaned back in his chair, and realized that the news had already started. Then the door to his booth crashed open and Norman marched in.

"What are you doing in here, Trent? Sleeping?" He bent over and squinted at the screen. "Downloading UFO pictures again?" He swatted at the screen with the back of his hand. "We're on the air here, and you're making a fool of me in front of millions of people."

Not hard, he thought, annoyed at Norman's intrusion. "How?" is what he actually said.

"I started doing the man-in-the-street skit, and you weren't there. People must have thought I was crazy, talking to nobody like that."

The Expatriate reached over and shuffled through the papers on his desk. "That isn't scheduled until the second hour."

"Well, I rescheduled it!"

"Walt, you've got to run these things past me first."

"You know the blasted skit, Trent. Your part of it never

changes, and we've done it a million times. Fact is, we're on the air and you aren't paying attention. You're in here behind your blasted mirrored glass, playing with your blasted computer, and I'm out there alone! Whose program is it, anyway, Trent? Answer me that, huh? Whose program is it?"

Through the glass he could see the engineer waving frantically. The news was almost over and he hadn't heard any of it. But then, neither had Norman, which meant the remaining schedule was right out the window. He'd have to be on his toes the rest of the program.

He looked up at Norman. He thought of Stinger missiles, and creative ways to use them. "It's your show, Walt. Always has been. Always will." He pointed toward the studio. "Which is why you'd better be out there when the mike goes live in ten seconds."

Norman looked over his shoulder at the door, half-turned. "This isn't over, Trent. Things will change for the better around here, or they'll just plain change. Got that?" He slammed the door loud enough that they probably heard it in the newsroom. Through the window, he could see Norman stalking back to his console. He sat down just as the ON AIR sign lit.

The Expatriate watched as the man slipped on his headphones, smiling and chattering into the microphone all the while. In the big scheme of things, something had to be done about Norman, but right now he would settle for something small and personal, a dig to pay him back for the little scene he'd just put on.

The phone rang and he picked it up. It was Sue, one of the operators who screened calls for the program. "Mr. McComb, we have a teenager on the phone, a girl who claims to be a mutant."

He almost laughed. They got these calls a lot, usually pranksters, college kids. "Why bother me, Sue? Hang up on her. Find Norman some like-minded yahoos to talk with."

There was silence from the other end of the line. "I think this one is real, sir. I don't know why, but I think she is, and I thought you'd want to know."

"We can't put a mutant on the air with Norman. Hang up on her." He started to put the phone down, then jerked it back. "Wait!" He thought about the small revenge he'd been look-

ing for against Norman. "Log the number off the caller ID box and send it over to me, then put her in Norman's call queue." The queue was a computer-controlled hold system. Notations on Norman's computer screen showed him the name of the callers, where they were calling from, and what they wanted to talk about, letting him fit the calls more smoothly into the show. "But don't tell Norman she's a mutant. Just—well, make something up."

"Sir?"

"Do it! This, Sue, is how great radio is made."

The Expatriate sat back and smiled. For once, he and his Trent McComb alter ego were in agreement on something. Whatever happened now was bound to be interesting.

Paige held her hand over the phone. "I'm on hold," she announced.

Angelo just smirked. "On hold forever is more like it."

Jubilee tossed down a spark that popped next to his head with a soft bang. "Angelo, do you have to be so negative? I mean, really."

He reached up and pinched the skin on his cheeks, pulling them out about a foot on either side, producing a huge, goofy grin. "It is what I do."

"And we all do," droned Monet, "what we do best."

Recall leaned back in the passenger set of the Caddy, his eyes closed. The mountain air had forced them to put the top up, and he was thinking about getting some sleep. Chill was already snoring in the backseat, and Pound had shoved one of his Kraftwerk CDs into the deck. He could hear some singer droning on about radioactivity in German. He wasn't sure if they were talking about the nuclear kind or the broadcast kind, but it sounded like a little of both.

He wondered where Paige was right now. He reached out with his powers, focusing first on the big targets that the RVs offered, then trying to home in on Paige.

His eyes shot open and he sat bolt upright so quickly that Pound swerved a little in response. He reached down and hit the eject button on the CD.

"Hey," complained Pound, "I was listening to that."

Recall ignored him. "Got to turn on the radio. Just got the weirdest feeling that Paige was there."

Pound laughed. "Yo, science boy, nothing in the magic box but chips and wires. No little girlfriends there."

He shook his head and fiddled with the tuning controls, still trying to pay attention to the feelings in his head. "I'm not kidding. This has never happened before and I want to find out what it means."

Pound glanced at him skeptically. "In the radio, huh?"

The Expatriate studied Walt Norman as a scientist might a rat. A plumber from Des Moines a few callers back had mentioned mutant rights, which had started Norman on a running tirade against the "mutant agenda." He watched as Norman slipped on his reading glasses to consult his own book.

The Expatriate smiled. The ghostwriter would be proud.

"It is a fallacy," read Norman, "that the rights of the individual can be tied to an accident of their birth. The mutant has no more right to the exercise of great and dangerous powers than I, as a pale skinned individual, have a right to stand in the summer sun without expecting to be burned.

"We all deal with these accidents of birth every day, each and every one of us, and yet the mutant wishes special treatment." He removed his glasses and put down the book. "This, humble listeners, is the mutant agenda. Not equal rights, but special rights for special people!"

Norman pushed the book and glasses aside, leaning back in his high-backed chair. "I have neither the right nor the ability to invade my neighbor's private thoughts; why should some mutant telepath have that right? I have to register and carry a concealed, but perfectly legal, handgun, but if a person can shoot lightning bolts from their fingers, well, that's okay. Let them shop at the same supermarket as you. Let them fix your braces. Let them work at your child's day care. You don't have the right to stop it, even to know it. They're the one with the rights. See how it starts? And that's only the beginning."

He squinted at the computer screen, his finger poised over a button on his console. "Let's go to caller—Peg—in Montana. Peg, what do you think about this mutant agenda?"

This is it. The Expatriate reached for his mouse and clicked a few buttons on his screen. Norman's first instinct when he

realized what he had on the line would be to disconnect the caller, but the Expatriate had just disabled that function. Short of crawling behind the master console and pulling out the phone wires, there was no way Norman would get "Peg" off the line before she hung up. But the caller didn't answer, and for a moment, he thought all his efforts had been for nothing.

Norman stared at the screen, looking for another candidate to put on the air. "Caller?"

Then the voice, a teenage girl, quavering with the nervousness that he'd heard in a million callers before her. The accent was carefully neutral, but his trained ear could hear a bit of some southern drawl under it. Tennessee?

"I don't think there is one, Mr. Norman. Mutants are just people who want to be treated like anyone else."

Norman was visibly startled and glanced in the direction of his booth, but he wasn't mad yet. He hadn't really figured things out. He turned back to the microphone. "What makes you think that, Peg? How would you know what mutants want?"

A pause. *"Because I am one."*

Norman's mouth hung open. He punched for the disconnect button, but nothing happened.

The Expatriate wondered what Norman would do next. If he was stupid, he'd just tear into the girl, because mutant or no, she clearly was a girl. A direct attack would lose him sympathy, even among his antimutant audience,

Amazingly, Norman showed some restraint. His hand strayed away from the disconnect button, either because he had other plans, or simply because he'd realized the button didn't work. "How old are you, Peg?"

Another hesitation. *"I'm seventeen."*

This time the accent was more noticeable. *It probably slips out under stress*, the Expatriate thought with a smile. A girl who hid things. Would Norman be smart enough to exploit that?

Norman continued, "You're still in high school?"

"I go to a private school."

The corners of Norman's mouth twitched up at that revelation. He was looking back in control of the situation, though his forehead was glossy with sweat. "A private school," he said slowly, "a special school. I see. Your parents must be rich to send you to a private school."

• • •

Recall was nearly jumping out of his seat.

Chill sat up in the back, trying to shake off sleep and see what the commotion was all about. He cleared his throat loudly. "Wha—?"

"Paige!" Recall pointed at the radio. "She said her name was Peg, but that's Paige, on the radio talking to some anti-mutant guy."

Chill turned his head, concentrating on the girl's voice.

"No, sir. My daddy died, and my momma isn't rich."

Then a man's voice. "So, how can you afford this school?"

The girl again. *"I'm on a scholarship."*

The man. "Paid for—by mutants?"

"It does sound like Paige," admitted Chill.

Recall shushed him.

There was a pause before she answered. *"In part, yeah, I guess so."*

"You wouldn't care to tell me the name of the school, would you?"

A long pause, and the Expatriate wondered if she'd hung up.

"That's a secret," she finally said.

The Expatriate nodded appreciatively. *Good, good. Make her look evasive, untruthful.*

"A secret," echoed Norman. "A secret private school supported by mutants." He gathered his thoughts. "You mutants stick together pretty good, don't you? Look out for each other, do you?"

"Yes, sir, I guess we do."

"See, now you're only seventeen and I can see that you mean well, but you just don't understand. That is the mutant agenda. Can't you see that?"

"No, sir, I can't."

"You say mutants want to be just like anyone else, but you have a special scholarship to go to a special secret school. With other mutants I'd venture?"

"Yes, sir."

"A special mutant school. Why can't you go to school with regular students if you want to be like them?"

Exasperation in the voice. *"Because they won't let us."*

"So you need a special school where you can't be bullied by—regular humans?"

"We need to learn to control our powers."

"Control of mutant powers is the whole issue, Peg. Your powers are uncontrolled, and yet you want to be just like anyone else? I'm sorry, but you see how that just can't be, don't you?"

Angelo watched Paige chewing her lip, trying to think of a way out of the corner she'd been backed into. *"I guess I do,"* she said abruptly, and punched the disconnect button.

"Well," he said, "that went well."

Angelo suddenly realized that if Paige had possessed the mutant power to shoot daggers from her eyes, he'd be dead. He held up his hands apologetically. "Hey, hey, just trying to inject a little humor."

He could see Jono watching Paige in the rearview. He obviously wanted to comfort her, but didn't know how. They'd been instructed to turn down the radio while Paige was on the air. He reached over and turned it back up.

Norman's voice came from the speakers. "... and Peg, if you're listening out there, I can see how you wouldn't understand what the adult mutants are up to, their agenda, and their master plan for humanity. I don't blame you for being mad. You're just mad at the wrong guy."

Jono reached over and clicked off the radio. "Jerk."

"Told you so," said Angelo.

"Shut up, Angelo," said everyone else in unison.

Recall had turned off the radio, but the three of them all stared at its dark face. Traffic reflectors thumped under the tires, and Pound veered them back into their freeway lane.

"Jerk," said Recall.

"You said it," agreed Pound.

Chill leaned over the seat back, frowning. "She walked right into it."

Recall scowled. "She was used, Chill. I'm the broadcast major here, and he turned the call into an interview, then used every trick in the book to skew things his way. She didn't have a chance."

Chill reclined in the backseat, draping his arm over his eyes. "Maybe she shouldn't have tried."

"She did try, Chill. Give her that. It took a lot of courage to make that call. You've done enough public speaking to know how scary that microphone can be. This is the same thing a hundred times over."

Chill lifted his arm and looked up at Recall. "You're right, of course. Hey, I'm only half awake here."

Recall chuckled and slapped his foot playfully. "Engage brain before opening mouth."

"So," said Chill, "what do we do about it?"

Recall considered. "We've been keeping our distance intentionally, but maybe that isn't such a good idea. Maybe they do need our help." He turned to Pound. "Mr. Dog Pound, prepare to lay in a course change."

Pound saluted. "Aye, sir. Standing by for new heading. Where to, sir?"

Recall thought of Paige.

The Expatriate stepped into the phone room expecting only to pick up the caller ID number he'd requested. Instead, he walked into the hub of chaos. All the operators were talking and typing frantically, every phone line was flashing.

He stepped over to Sue's station. She glanced up at him with blue eyes, acknowledging his presence. She finished up the call, then punched her hold button and put her hand over her headset mike. "It's the mutant girl," she said quickly. "They loved it. They want more." She slid over a memo slip with a phone number written on it and went back to her calls.

He picked up the slip, folded it carefully, and put it in his shirt pocket. Later he'd use his resources to track down the caller. He stepped out of the phone room into the hall, and nearly ran head-on into Norman.

Norman glared at him. "I should kill you for that stunt, Trent." Then his expression changed into a reluctant smile. "But it sure as hell worked out, didn't it? Bet you thought I couldn't handle the little minx."

"I was throwing you a challenge, Walt, but you obviously were up to it." He jerked his thumb toward the phone room. "Things are crazy in there. The listeners ate it up. You have to get her back on the air."

Norman looked surprised. "Back on the air? How?"

He thought of the phone number in his pocket, but decided that some things should be kept in reserve. He wanted to know who the caller was, but Norman didn't need that information. "Just get back on the air and ask her to call again. Word will get to her. Half the country is listening, Walt."

He brightened. "They are, aren't they?" He glanced at his watch. "Got to get back on the air."

With a sense of accomplishment, the Expatriate watched the host trot away. Norman had been screwed, and hadn't even bothered to chew him out. Better, Norman couldn't even suspect how badly he'd been set up.

The Expatriate returned to his booth and called up the computer program that digitally recorded each day's broadcast. It was the work of only a few minutes to isolate the mutant girl's call and transfer it to its own audio file. He then put the file in an e-mail and sent it off.

He picked up the phone and called Ivan. "This is the Expatriate. Check your e-mail, there is a sound file in it for you to give to your technicians."

Ivan sounded puzzled. "Sound file?"

"Our false mutant must have a voice. Base it on the sample I've sent you."

"A voice? Why?"

He chuckled softly. "This is radio, Ivan. The audience will not be able to see the murderous mutant. They must be able to hear her."

CHAPTER EIGHT



“We close our broadcast this hour with pictures of a colorful costumed personality who calls himself Razorback, seen here entertaining children yesterday at Wassner Children’s Hospital in Texarkana, Arkansas. He may look more like a wild boar than Captain America, but the kids still seem to love him. Good afternoon.”

—excerpt from WNN news broadcast

The Xabago pulled into the scenic overlook and the kids piled out, Everett and Jubilee first, the rest trailing behind, with Paige being the last of the bunch.

Paige watched Everett and Jubes racing to the railing, wishing she still felt that kind of innocent excitement about the trip. It wasn't like so much of this wasn't new to her, that she wasn't appreciative of the scenery, that she had no sense of adventure. But the Norman show thing had really gotten under her skin, no pun intended, and her call had only made things worse.

She saw Jono standing on what seemed to be the brink of the world, looking off into a vista of snow-topped mountains, the wind blowing his hair, his hands jammed into his pockets, looking as alone as she felt. She supposed she'd punished him enough, if there was ever even anything to punish, but now she didn't know how to talk to him, what to say. She turned her back on him and sat down on a park bench to think.

Angelo sauntered by, seemingly more interested in watching people than scenery. He was using the image inducer, the hologram making him look like any other Hispanic boy his age, maybe the way he would have looked if not for his mutation. She suspected that he resented the necessary deception, that he'd rather people accepted him the way he was, but as usual, Angelo was busy trying to appear cool and unconcerned. He stopped a few yards away, not looking at her.

She gazed at the mountains and sighed. Judging from the maps, these weren't really the Rockies. To really see those, they'd have to go farther south, but they were plenty impressive to her. They'd called the Kentucky hills she'd grown up in mountains, but they were nothing compared to these craggy peaks.

She remembered how big they'd seemed when she was a little girl, how big everything about the world of Kentucky had been. She'd left that all behind when she went to Xavier's School, traded it for the bigger world beyond the hills of home. It was only times like this that she appreciated just how much bigger it actually was. Bigger, and scarier, in ways that had to be experienced to be understood.

Angelo stood watching cars pull through the crowded parking area. "Hey, look," he said to her, "the frat boys are here."

She looked up and saw Dog Pound's pink Cadillac pulling into the lot. It parked a couple spaces over from their RV, and the guys jumped out. Recall made a beeline for her, while the others headed for the railing.

Angelo watched him approach, then looked at Paige. "I'd better clear out, huh?" He turned and strolled off in the direction of Jono. Paige didn't even want to think about the trouble Angelo might be stirring up, but she'd worry about that later.

She smiled as Recall sat down next to her.

"I heard you," he said, "on the radio."

Her smile faded and she hung her head slightly. "I was hoping you wouldn't."

Jubilee leaned against the viewpoint railing, chatting with Everett. Conversation stopped, though, as Monet came and leaned next to her, looking out at the mountains with that typically unreadable expression of hers.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Jubilee was trying to make conversation.

"They are mountains. I have seen bigger. I have seen more beautiful."

Jubilee frowned. Truth be told, the boonies kind of bored her, too, but she had her buds and her Danger-boy and life was pretty good. Until now.

"M, why do you always have to be such a stuck-up little brat-girl?" She gestured at the view. "See the pretty postcard, live and in person? Can't you even give it that? What do you want? Fireworks?" She grinned evilly. "I can give you fireworks."

"Jubes!" Everett scolded her. "Down, girl."

Monet just stared off at the mountains, and Jubilee wondered if she'd gone into one of her trances. Then she said, "I want something that speaks to my soul as well as my eyes." She turned and walked back toward the Xabago.

Jubilee watched her go. "Well, that was totally profound. And way cryptic. Typical."

Everett clucked. "Ease off. There goes one lonely girl."

Jubilee turned back to the mountains and took a deep breath of the thin, cool air. Maybe Everett was right. But maybe she'd just never understand Monet.

. . .

Angelo stood next to Jono, trying to figure out what it was he saw out there. Angelo just saw rocks. A lot of rocks. He just didn't get it.

Of course, this was Jono, Mr. Brooding. Could be he was looking at nothing out there. Maybe he was just looking inside, and the view was typically bleak.

Angelo figured he was as tight with Jono as anybody at the school, and that was only natural. The two of them formed the freak-show contingent of the group. He felt the small image-inducer device in his pocket, watched a family with an even half-dozen kids walk by. The eldest, a girl of maybe fifteen, met his eyes and smiled. He wondered what would happen if he turned the image inducer off right now. Would the mother scream? Would the dad try to defend his rugrats? Would that girl be afraid? Worse, would she feel sorry for him?

He turned back to the mountains. They just didn't care, one way or the other. You could say that for them. They just stood there. Had since before he was born. Would after he was gone. He'd give the mountains that.

He glanced over at Jono. "Bad day, *hombre*?"

"Shut up, Angelo."

"I get that a lot. Just making conversation." He waited a minute for the air to clear. "This new guy, you know, he's nothing."

"I don't care about that."

"If you say so."

They didn't say anything for a while. The wind did the talking for them.

"That airport thing. That still bloody stings. Teach me to save anybody."

Angelo nodded. "What I've said all along. Do what you want to do, but don't expect gratitude."

Jono was physically incapable of sighing anymore, but the image inducer was good enough to give the impression that he did.

Recall slid a little closer to Paige on the bench. Right now, she didn't mind. "You did good, but he's a professional. Nothing in the Danger Room prepared you for that."

She smiled. "We don't have a Danger Room. We practice

in our biosphere. It's less dramatic, but prettier."

He laughed nervously. "I heard Dr. McCoy talk about the Danger Room one time. I figured all X-Men had them."

She shook her head and picked at a loose flake of brown paint on the bench. "You've got it wrong. We aren't X-Men. We're just the junior league. Trainees. They call us 'Generation X.'"

He chuckled. "That's cool."

"Beats the heck out of 'X-Babies.' " The chip came loose in her hand. She flicked it toward a nearby trash can. "I'd like to be in the X-Men someday, though, like my brother. Sometimes I've even said I wanted to lead them. Days like this, though, I wonder if I've got the stuff. Being an X-Man is more than genes."

"It's pride," he said. "It's will. It's heart."

"You sound like Cyclops."

"You've got those things, Paige. You would never have had the courage to make that call if you didn't."

"But I blew it."

"I can help you. I'm a broadcast major. I know these things." He put his hand on hers. "Let me help."

She tossed her head. "Yeah, like I'd ever get back on in a hundred years. Angelo didn't believe I'd even get on the first time."

He smiled, then laughed as he looked into her eyes and saw that she really didn't understand. "You haven't been listening to the program, have you? Norman's talking about you."

"Gloating, right?"

"He wants you to call back, Paige. He's practically begging—even though he's trying hard to make it look like he's not begging. Like I said, this guy is a professional."

Her eyes went wide. "You're kidding me, right?"

He shook his head. "Let's go listen if you don't believe me."

"Oh, Lord."

The little car squealed around every curve of the narrow mountain road, but the tires stuck to the pavement, and Emma's driving hadn't killed them yet. At least, Sean reassured himself as they strayed frighteningly close to a sheer

drop of several hundred feet, if they went off the edge, his mutant ability gave him the power to fly.

They were twenty-five miles south of Butte, Montana, where they'd left the RVs. Somewhere in this unending wilderness was the ranch of a Native American family that took in Native American mutants from across the West. The head of that family was a man named William Silver, a mutant himself, and a good friend of Charles Xavier. Silver was also, at ninety-two, one of the most elderly mutants Sean had ever met.

"Have you ever met William Silver, Emma?"

"No, have you?"

"Years ago, when I was still with the X-Men." He flinched as a tree trunk swished by, barely clearing the mirror on his door. "Sometimes, when I look at our wee lads and lasses, I think I was never that young, but when I think about William Silver, I think I'll never be that old. This business isn't one conducive to living a normal life span."

The little car went into a four-wheel drift as Emma guided them onto an even smaller side road, and Sean grabbed on with both hands just to stay in his seat. "Saints preserve us, Emma, you keep driving like that, we may not live out the day."

Emma smiled, never taking her eyes off the road. She looked happier than he'd seen her in a while. "I only make it look dangerous, Sean. It's my sense of drama."

He watched the cliff edge sailing by just below the bottom of his door. "Well, lass, you had me fooled." He reached for the radio, looking for a distraction from the drive. "I wonder if we can even get a station out here. Feels like we're a million miles from anywhere."

Sean pushed the scan button. He watched most of the dial go by before it stopped. They caught the announcer in mid-sentence. "*—of the Mountain Sports Network. We now join The Walt Norman Show, already in progress.*"

Sean angrily snapped off the radio.

"What?" Emma drifted through another curve. "You found a station. Out here in these mountains, beggars can't be choosers."

"Walt Norman," was all he said.

"The name rings a bell, but I can't place it."

"Came out of nowhere a few years ago doing a talk show on some low-watt Chicago radio station. Before that, he'd been doing commodity reports or some such. But then he comes up with this antimutant routine, and the audience eats it up. He gets syndicated on two hundred stations across the country and has been making life miserable for mutants everywhere ever since."

Emma pushed a strand of snowy hair out of her eyes. "Ah, so that's how I know the name."

"You've heard his show, then?"

She smiled. "His commodity reports. Business news is about the only radio I listen to. Now I know why."

"Trust me, the man's the lowest of the low."

"Okay, we'll stop off in Chicago and I'll turn his brain into vanilla pudding."

"Be serious, Emma."

"Who said I wasn't serious?" she said with a grin as she swerved the car through another turn.

The Expatriate heard the beep that indicated incoming e-mail to his business account. He brought it up on his screen and smiled with satisfaction. The call from the mutant teen had come from a cellular phone, and moreover, his sources were able to find that the call had been placed from somewhere in Montana. His attempt to trace the phone account back had dead-ended with a dummy business and a private post-office box in Massachusetts, but that only supported the girl's claim that she was a mutant. They were a slippery and secretive bunch.

Moreover, he thought he had an idea which mutant. While Ivan hadn't been tracking the young mutants from Seattle closely, he had turned in occasional reports as he, or one of their installations, picked up the tracking devices he'd installed on their vehicle. One of those would have put them in the right part of Montana at about the right time.

He opened his briefcase and took out the pictures Ivan had sent him of the young mutants. He flipped through them. Four females. The platinum blonde was too old. One was dark skinned and did not seem to be the type to have the hillbilly accent he'd detected. The other dark-hair seemed to have

Asian features—again, a long shot for the accent. That left the other blonde.

He leaned back in his chair and laughed softly to himself. There was no proof, but he was sure he was right.

There was only one problem. She hadn't called back, despite Norman's repeated on-air requests. That would never do. It was time to turn the heat up to high and see if things came to a boil. And if not . . . Well, he knew where she lived—or at least where she was living for the moment.

The Xabago was jammed with the six Gen-Xers and the mutant musketeers. Every piece of furniture and every bit of floor in the front of the camper had someone sitting or lying on it.

On the radio, Walt Norman was finishing a painfully lame patter song about a telepath who robbed his neighbors blind by reading their minds. Paige was sitting on the front edge of the recliner, her whole body posture screaming tension. "This is stupid," she said.

Recall was sitting cross-legged on the floor by her feet. "He'll say it. Just wait."

The announcer came on to introduce a news break. Then he added. *"And tune in next hour when Walt will be getting a call from our mutant mystery girl! You asked for it, and she's back."*

Jubilee nearly fell out of the top-gun seat. "Did you hear that?"

Jono looked puzzled. "What? He's got a bloody ringer?"

Recall frowned. "I don't think so. I think Paige hasn't called back when he asked her to, so he just threw down the gauntlet."

Everett nodded. "Call back or look like a chicken."

Recall rocked his head uncertainly. "Something like that." He looked around. "Where's the phone?"

Angelo groaned. "Not again."

Paige looked uncertain. "What if he just makes a fool of me again?"

"He might," agreed Recall, "but you learned something last time, and you'll learn more this time. Eventually, you might just make a fool of him."

Monet found the phone on the dashboard and handed it to Paige. She started to look for the number in her pocket, but

realized that it was permanently burned into her memory. She dialed the number quickly, before her courage faltered. The phone was answered by a hold recording. She held her hand over the phone and looked hopefully at Recall. "What do I say?"

"Don't let him run things like last time. Don't let him put you on trial. Give him a true anecdote. People love those, and it gives you concrete facts to work from. Those are harder for him to distort."

"But not impossible to distort?"

He shrugged apologetically. "No, just harder. But it's better than nothing, right?"

When the screening operator answered, Paige simply said, "This is Peg, the 'mystery mutant girl.' "

The Expatriate pounded his fist on the desk in triumph. His screen showed that "Peg" was on the line. Norman had been furious at his on-air announcement that the girl would call, even though there were no assurances that she would, but the Expatriate had managed to duck out of the booth and avoid him during the break. After that, Norman could only express his anger in facial expressions directed at the booth, and thanks to the mirrored glass, he couldn't even be sure that anyone was inside.

But the gamble had paid off, and surely even Norman would have to admit that when the time came. For now, despite Norman's anger, he was playing right along. He flipped over a page in his notes and leaned close to the microphone as though all were going according to his plan. "And now, as Trent promised earlier, we have our mutant mystery girl, Peg." He punched up her line on his console. "You there Peg?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are the polite one, aren't you?" He made it sound like something less than a virtue. "You made quite an impression on our listeners the other day. We've had just a ton of calls. Seems like people want to hear about the mutant lifestyle, right from the source."

"What's a mutant lifestyle?"

Norman laughed. "Well, I don't really have to explain that to you, do I, Peg? Hey, have you done any thinking about

what I was telling you last time? Got a handle on this mutant agenda thing yet?"

"Not really, Mr. Norman, but I was thinking about something that happened to some friends of mine a short while back, and I was thinking you could tell me how it fit into the mutant agenda."

"A story!" He said it with mock surprise. "Well, I'm always set for a good story. You just fire away and I'll tell you what I think of it."

"Some friends of mine, three guys not much older than me, were on a car trip in Idaho, when their radiator boiled over. They pulled off to let things cool down. They were just minding their own business, goofing off, when a truckload of locals stopped and tried to clean their clocks. Would have too, if me and some of my other friends hadn't happened along to help out."

"Well, now, Peg, that's an interesting story, all right, and a sad one."

The girl ran over the end of his sentence. "*That's not the end of it, Walt. We asked them where they learned to hate mutants, and they mentioned your show, mentioned you by name.*"

"Well, now, Peg, you have to realize that a lot of people listen to my show, millions of them. Good people, bad people, even you listen to my show, Peg, and I can't be held accountable for everything that every one of them does. And I am sorry for what happened to your friends." Then his tone of voice shifted slightly, and he seemed to change gears. "But trying to put myself in the shoes of rural people, farm people, the very lifeblood of our nation, one can hardly blame them for trying to protect what it is that they have from what you've described, a veritable mutant invasion. These guys in their car, you and all your friends, there must have been a virtual army of mutants. You can see why they'd be threatened."

"*Nobody did anything to threaten them.*"

"Then let me ask you this, Peg. How did they know these guys in a car, stopped by the side of the road like anyone else, how did they know they were mutants?"

A pause. "*They were goofing off, using their powers. These guys saw—*"

"Driving down their road, in their country, their home, and

they see these strange teenagers from out of state, people who don't belong there, exhibiting strange and terrifying powers? People have a right to defend their homes, their way of life, from the invasion of outsiders of any kind, and I think that goes without saying."

The girl tried to protest, but Norman had already hit the mute button to silence her. "We're coming up on a break, Peg, and I want to hear from some other callers about this, but you call back tomorrow, and we can talk some more. This is *The Walt Norman Show*, and we'll be right back with more calls after the news."

The ON AIR sign went out, and Norman took off his earphones, ripped the plug out of the console, and threw the headset at the Expatriate's window so hard that he caught himself ducking. Fortunately, the thick tempered glass he'd ordered was nearly shatterproof. He looked up just in time to see Norman charge into the booth.

"McComb! What was the idea of that blasted stupid stunt? If that girl hadn't called, I'd have seemed like a fool to my viewers! Or was that the plan?" He shook his fist in front of him, then pointed his index finger out as an afterthought, as though it had been his intention all along. He managed to keep a lid on his temper, but just barely. "You're lucky she called, McComb, or you'd be out on the street right now, so help me you would."

The door opened, and Betty Norman—"Mrs. Dale"—poked her head in. "I thought I heard yelling."

Norman didn't look back. "Get out."

She put on a brave smile. "The switchboards are jammed. Everybody is talking about it."

He turned on her suddenly. "Get out of here, old woman! You've meddled in my life for the last time. McComb isn't the only one who could be fired around here! The ratings have been flat, and the network has been talking about making changes. I could sure use that to simplify my life right now."

Norman's mother withdrew quickly.

He turned back. "You just remember who's in charge here, Trent. I'm not warning you again."

The Expatriate tried to look sincerely abject. "It won't happen again, Walt. You're the boss, and judging from how you handled that call, you're the man. That's the only reason I'd

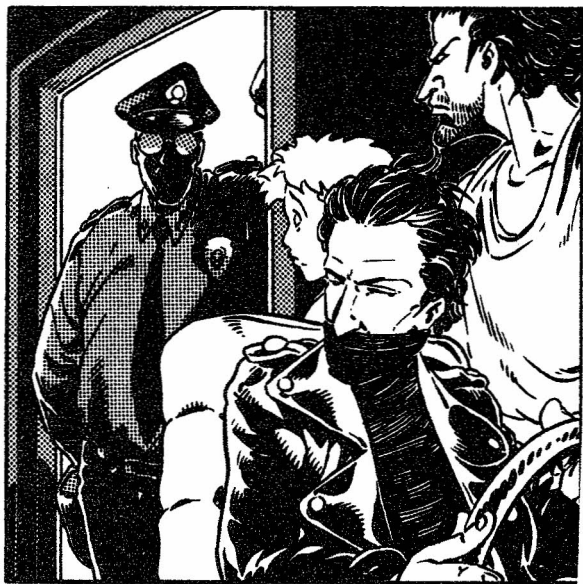
even think about putting you on the spot like that. I know you can handle it."

Norman was brought up a little short by the unexpected flattery. "I can handle everything, Trent, but your blasted excuses." He started to back out of the small room. "Just make sure I don't have to listen to any more."

When he was gone, the Expatriate clinched his eyes shut with rage, and with some effort brought his anger back under control. He sat down, picked up the phone, and dialed. "Ivan? This plan cannot be completed too soon, my friend. Norman is a fool, and he will wreck everything to salve his own monumental ego. We must stop him."

On the other end of the phone, Ivan chuckled. "We will."

CHAPTER NINE



HONK IF YOU'RE HUMAN

—bumper sticker



From a thousand places among the towering trees, plumes of steam drifted up lazily, tracking with the wind until they evaporated in the blue sky over Yellowstone National Park's geothermal area. It was a museum of volcanic oddities, spectacular geysers, bubbling mud-pots, rainbow-colored hot springs, and towering mineral formations that looked like modern art. Sean Cassidy couldn't help but grin at the look on Emma Frost's face. She was obviously, and probably despite herself, impressed.

Sean drove the Xtravagant, letting her rubberneck. "I take it, lass, that you've never been here before."

She shook her head. "I have to confess that I haven't travelled much where business didn't take me. I didn't know I was missing so much. There can't be another place like this on Earth."

"It reminds me of the Savage Land, actually, but you have to switch the grizzly bear and moose for T-rex and stegosaurus."

As they pulled into the crowded parking lot for the Old Faithful geyser, they both started scanning for a parking space. "I suspect," Emma said, "that there are fewer RVs in the Savage Land."

"Aye, the critters eat them as soon as they can pull off the Antarctic freeway," Sean said.

They turned into the RV area just as a silver motor home with British Columbia plates cut in front of them and took the last space. Sean squinted in annoyance. "Blast them."

The door opened and an older couple dressed in matching flower print shirts climbed out, seemed in unison to remember something important, and jumped back into the RV. It backed out of the space just as Sean and Emma pulled up.

Sean glanced suspiciously at Emma. "Tell me you'll not be having anything to do with that."

She shrugged innocently. "It's possible that they really did leave a burner on at home."

Sean said nothing. Breaking Emma Frost of her wicked ways was a job done only by millimeters, not inches. Besides, it hadn't been *that* wicked. He carefully eased their rig between a smaller RV and a twin-cab pickup pulling a trailer. "Well," he said, setting the parking brake, "that was no more difficult than landing the *Blackbird* on a wet sponge."

Emma looked down the line of parked rigs. "Where do you think the students are?"

"They're supposed to meet up with the M.O.N.S.T.E.R. lads. They'll catch up with us later."

"Maybe I should scan for them."

"Let the kids be, Emma. If'n you're really worried, call them on the cell phone like regular folks."

"I'd feel like an anxious mother hen."

He chuckled. "But scanning their minds, that's not a problem?"

"It's just—they spend so much time by themselves. I suppose I figured that the girls would ride over here with me, and you over there with the boys."

"It's only natural that they'd not want to hang out with a couple of fossils like you and me. And as for me staying over there, you've seen that great beastie they picked out. Can y'blame me for wanting to stay over here as much as I can? It's bad enough I have to sleep there."

Sean watched the clouds of steam coming from the Old Faithful basin. "I wonder when the geyser's next set to erupt."

"Twenty minutes," Emma said without hesitation. Sean shot her a look, and she shrugged. "It's foremost on the minds of most of the people around here. It would be difficult for me not to know." She got up and headed back to the kitchen area. "Do you want a sandwich?"

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Are you offering to serve?"

She smiled as she raided the fridge. "I'm offering to leave out the Dijon if you want to make your own."

He climbed out of the driver's seat and went back to join her. "Coming from you, Emma, that's practically a proposition."

Paige kicked aside a pile of dirty T-shirts so she could sit in the Xabago's recliner. She remembered the pile as having been there yesterday, but she was certain that it had grown. "Don't you guys ever wash anything?"

Angelo was digging through the pantry, and came up with a chocolate-chip granola bar. "Si. When I run out of shirts, I

wash them. Assuming I can't find one in the pile that isn't too rank."

Jubilee frowned down at him from the top-gun seat. "Angelo, you can be so gross."

Everett emerged from the bathroom. "My shirts are all clean."

"I know your shirts are all clean, Ev." Jubilee's voice took on an approving tone.

Angelo mocked her in a high, annoying falsetto. "I know your shirts are all clean, Ev." His voice returned to normal. "You're a traitor to your gender," he said, taking a big bite of the granola bar. He made a big show of sulking up toward the front and fell heavily into the passenger-side seat.

Next to him, Jono was fumbling with the radio. "I don't think we can get Norman out here. Just as well. I'm sick of the blighter."

Paige walked over, climbed up on the framework that supported the top-gun seat, and stood next to Jubilee, surveying the scenery around the picnic area where they were parked. "It's nice to know there are still a few places Norman can't touch."

There was a knock at the door, and at Everett's invitation, Recall led the rest of the M.O.N.S.T.E.R. musketeers in. "Sorry we're late. We spotted a grizzly bear by the side of the road, and the Pounder had to try talking with it."

Monet took a pillow off her head and sat up from where she'd been napping on the couch. "What did it say?"

Dog Pound blushed. "'I'm hungry.'"

Chill and Recall chortled. Chill raised his hands over his head, wrists turned down in an imitation of a standing bear. "As I recall it was more like—" he raised and deepened his voice "—"I'm hungry!" " Both of them broke into giggles.

Pound looked sheepish. "That's the problem with talking to animals. Most of them aren't interested in what you have to say, they don't have much interesting to say themselves, and half the time, when they do have something to say, it isn't something you want to hear."

Paige stepped down from the observation bubble. "So, you don't like animals?"

He looked surprised. "No, I love animals. I'm studying to be a vet. That's the one place I figure my power will be really

useful. If you're observant, most animals are pretty good at telling you what they want you to know, but the one thing they really have trouble with is telling you where it hurts. It's someplace I can make a difference."

Jubilee smiled and nodded approvingly. "Hey, that's pretty cool. You're all right, Dog Pound."

He practically glowed. "Thanks, Jubilee." He sat down on the floor near the door. Chill lighted on the arm of the couch.

Recall knelt next to Paige's chair. "I was listening to you yesterday. You're getting better."

Paige shook her head. "Norman is still running me around like a whipped dog." She nodded apologetically at Pound. "No offense."

"Sure," said Recall, "he's got the home field advantage, but you're getting on the air most every day. You've got the ear of millions of people and you've got the chance to win them over, to show them that mutants are just people the same as anyone else."

She chewed her thumbnail. "Why don't you call them, Recall? You're trained to do this kind of thing."

He considered. "Because I'm not the one who had the courage to take a chance and get themselves on the air. You're the one they want to hear now. The chances of me getting on would be one in a million, but with you, every call is a sure thing. You can't waste that opportunity. I know you. You wouldn't want to."

"No," she admitted. "It's a shame I can't get on today. I suppose I could just call the number anyway."

Recall shook his head. "You don't want to call without knowing the context the show puts you in. Ignorance of that would be giving Norman a big club to use against you. Better just to skip today."

Jono turned around in the driver's seat and picked up a map off the floor. "You know, if we could find some more altitude, we might be able to pull in a station with Norman on it. We've got some time yet." He studied the map, then tapped it with his finger. "This lookout might be the ticket, and I think I can get us there by airtime."

Paige examined the map skeptically.

Recall shrugged. "Worth a try."

Jono spun around and cranked the Xabago. "Let's go, then."

Pound jumped up in a panic and wrestled the sticky door open. "I can't leave the car here!"

Chill leaned out the door after him and yelled, "Meet us there!" Then he leaned back and pulled the door closed.

Jono gunned the RV out of the picnic area and onto the main road. To his amazement, it was empty in their direction, though cars were lined up bumper to bumper on the other side.

"Da bomb," exclaimed Jubilee from the top-gun seat. "There's a moose in the road a few hundred yards back, and traffic is stopped!"

Recall stood between the front seats, looking eagerly out through the windshield. "Let's get while the getting's good."

Jono roared down the empty road, uncertain when they'd hit typical park traffic again. Then they heard the siren.

Jono looked in the side mirror. "Bloody hell." He slowed.

Paige found herself looking at Angelo, who had just balled up his granola bar wrapper and thrown it behind the couch. "Image inducers," she said.

Angelo blinked. "Image—?" He suddenly turned around and started pawing through the clutter behind the couch. "One of them is back here somewhere, I think."

Paige jumped up, wondering if she should help.

As the Xabago pulled to a stop, Recall pushed Angelo aside, lifted a cushion, and handed him an image inducer.

Paige looked at him. She could see a ranger car through the back window, lights flashing, and a ranger walking up the driver side of the vehicle. "Quick. Where's the other one?"

Recall had a puzzled look on his face. "Missoula?"

Skin had snapped on the inducer and suddenly looked, from the nose up, anyhow, like Jono's twin brother. "*Dios!* That rest room at Denny's!"

Paige saw the ranger standing outside Jono's window. "Too late now," she whispered harshly.

Jono slowly rolled down his window. "Is there a problem, Constable?"

The ranger was tall and muscular. Square-jawed, he looked at Jono from behind silvered aviator's glasses, and his expression said that he'd take no guff. The nameplate on his

uniform read TIMMONS. "Ranger, not Constable. May I see your license and registration, please?"

Jono took the registration from its holder above the sunvisor, and took out his Massachusetts license. Thanks to some strings pulled by Professor Xavier and a sympathetic clerk, the picture on the license had been computer altered to match his image inducer hologram, the hologram that now disguised Angelo rather than Jono.

"You know you were going ten over the limit back there."

"Sorry. Open road and all that. Went to my head."

The ranger studied the license, then Jono's face. "The scarf. Mind pulling that down for me? I take it you aren't planning on robbing the stage today?"

Jono blinked. "No, sir. I don't even know where it is."

"Then please pull down the scarf."

"I'd bloody rather not, if it's just the same. Sir."

The ranger slowly reached down and unsnapped the flap on his holster. "Now."

Paige pushed past Recall. She leaned down to the window, smiling as disarmingly as she could at the ranger. "Sir, I'm Paige Guthrie, and I can explain. You see, Jono had a terrible accident since that picture was taken. His face is—scarred, and he's very sensitive about it. Actually, his doctor, his therapist, said showing it to someone against his will could be very traumatic. Bad. Doctor's orders. Understand?"

There was a tense moment, then the officer took his hand away from his gun, and slowly removed his glasses. Paige could see that he was staring at the M.O.N.S.T.E.R. pin on her collar. He stepped back and studied the "Xabago" logo on the side of the RV. He pointed at it. "This X, it wouldn't have something to do with Professor Charles Xavier, would it?"

The kids all looked at each other in surprise.

Paige smiled. "Most of us are students from Xavier's School in Massachusetts." She gestured toward the back of the RV. "Our friends are from Washington state."

The ranger looked at Jono again. "I'd guess you're a mutant, then."

Jono just looked at him for a minute, then nodded.

Paige considered a moment before adding, "We're all mutants, officer. We didn't mean any harm."

The ranger smiled broadly and stuck his hand through the window, offering it to Paige. "Michael Timmons, alumnus of the University of Colorado Springs chapter. I didn't know there were any M.O.N.S.T.E.R.s left, but it figures that the Professor would keep it alive, if anyone could."

Paige shook his hand.

Chill put on his best pledge-drive smile and stepped forward. "I'm president of the Western Pacific University chapter. Pleased to meet you. If you don't mind my asking, are you a mutant too?"

Timmons laughed. "Not me, but my favorite cousin is. When she turned thirteen she developed telekinesis. After the exorcist didn't work, they almost put her in an institution. That's when the Professor contacted us. He was able to help her, and I was a convert for life. Any friend of the Professor's is a friend of mine." He looked at his ticket book, then flipped it closed. "Listen, Jonothan, you be a little more cautious in the future, okay?"

Jono nodded.

"But that said, I was supposed to be off duty fifteen minutes ago anyway." He smiled in at them hopefully. "How's about you young folks let me show you my Yellowstone?"

As usual, the lights in the small office belonging to "Trent McComb" were on well into the evening. Inside, the Expatriate looked over the schedule for the next day's broadcast with little enthusiasm. Over the past few years, he had quietly assigned most of his off-air work for the program to others, intervening directly only when it served his purposes or was necessary to avoid suspicion.

Unfortunately, Norman's recently increased scrutiny of his activities made this one of those times. It was lamentable, just when there were so many other things to coordinate, so many things to do, and time was so limited. Sometimes the strain of his double life was almost unendurable.

He had heard rumors in the underworld that many of America's so-called super heroes maintained secret identities apart from their costumed personas. He imagined that, like him, they needed to move about without detection, to gain access to information and resources not their own.

Probably they were not much different from him, working

secretly and outside the law on their own private agendas. He couldn't imagine that anyone could wield such power without some ultimately selfish intent. He wondered for a moment how so many of them had so successfully fooled the public. But then, he knew better than anyone how the media could manipulate public perceptions.

Secret identities? He wondered if the concept was more than utilitarian. Did these so-called heroes secretly have homes and families, pretend to be mere mortals? It was an audacious concept, but plausible. He wondered if the X-Men possessed secret identities. Did the hated invader Wolverine go home to a wife and children? *Hi, honey, I'm home. Hard day toppling the Genoshan government. What's for dinner?*

He looked down to discover that the schedule had somehow been crumpled and shredded in his straining fist. He tossed the paper aside in disgust and looked at the radio sitting on his desk. Perhaps he could not find out where they lived, but they would have neighbors, friends, employers, business associates, and beyond that a billion genetically untainted humans to root them out and crush them by sheer numbers.

It was through the radio that the Expatriate would rally those masses, call them to arms, leave the X-Men and all American mutants with no safe haven and no place to hide. He would drive them into the sea, just as they had driven him from his beloved island homeland.

He heard his latch click and watched as the door swung slowly open. Walt Norman stood in the doorway dressed in an expensively tailored black dinner suit. He was smiling unpleasantly, and leaned against the door frame sloppily, as though slightly drunk. "Working hard, Trent? Good. You work very hard and maybe I'll let you stay for a while." He reached into his pocket and took out a folded white envelope, which he threw onto the desk.

The Expatriate looked at the envelope. "What's this?"

"Ratings, my boy. Ratings. Going through the roof since that girl started to call. I just had dinner with the network president. I'm the golden boy right now, Trent, the king of the airwaves, back on top where I belong." He chuckled. "They're talking a new book deal, maybe a weekly show on cable. Maybe a late-night talk show. I can do no wrong." The smile faded. "And just in case there was ever any doubt about

who was in charge around here, Trent, I could crush you like a bug." He turned, closing the door after him. "Have a good night."

The Expatriate watched the closed door for a long time, the patterns of light and darkness in the bubbled glass window, the false name visible in mirror image through the glass. There was a fully loaded Beretta Model 92 automatic pistol hidden in a stationery box in his bottom-right desk drawer. With a single phone call he could have Norman shot, stabbed, strangled, burned, blown up, or skinned alive—none of which, he reminded himself, would serve his purpose in any way.

He had to put his personal feelings aside in favor of the big picture, though that was becoming an increasingly difficult thing to do. He needed to talk to a friend, and there were few people in the world who could claim that honor of him. He picked up the phone and dialed Ivan.

It was answered on the third ring. From sounds in the background, he could tell that Ivan was in a moving car.

"Expatriate? I am sorry, but I have not had time to check what progress has been made on the voice box modifications. I didn't expect you to call until tomorrow. I did, however, pass along the latest batch of voice sample recordings."

"That isn't why I called, Ivan. I simply needed to talk."

"Ah, that idiot Norman again?"

"How did you know?"

Laughter from the phone. "Of all the sacrifices you make for our cause, tolerating that buffoon is the most unenviable."

"Some days this charade becomes unbearable, pretending to be an American, pretending to be Norman's toady. It was easier when we were mercenaries in South America. It's easier to take out your aggressions with an assault rifle in your hands, and a ready supply of paid targets to kill."

"Easier, but less profitable. This smuggling and arms dealing operation would not have been possible without *The Walt Norman Show's* resources. We have toll-free numbers, web sites, fax networks, voice mail, all courtesy of your American radio clown. It's the perfect cover."

"We're growing past the point where we need those resources. I've been thinking we should set up our own network anyway, as a failsafe. Phones, computers, these are only a matter of money, and we have that now. As for the cover,

well, that's still useful for as long as we can keep it. But I can't help worrying, especially given Norman's recent unpredictability. If something were to happen to the show right now, our organization would fall apart like wet tissue paper."

"That would indeed be a wise precaution, but any alternative would deprive you of the pleasure of making things difficult for the American mutants. We are much alike, you and I, good soldiers of our respective countries, caught up in political turmoil that was no fault of our own, exiles seeking only justice against the American meddlers—and a little profit to lighten our day. That my country was the Soviet Union, and that yours is Genosha is only a matter of details."

"Perhaps you should be running this operation, Ivan, not I."

A chuckle from the phone. "While I have my skills, I have neither the imagination, nor the fire in my gut. The Soviet Union is dead and will never return. The men of power who killed it are dead or dying themselves. My demons shriveled with my country. I wish to bedevil the Americans, but it is only sport for me.

"Your X-Men are very much alive, your Genosha perhaps not beyond redemption. This is what drives you. That is what will drive us both to greatness. I bow to the fire in your spirit, my friend. Nothing can stand before it. Norman is only a gnat, one we will swat soon enough."

"It can't happen too soon, Ivan."

"I am counting the days, my friend."

CHAPTER TEN



“*Caller:* See, now that’s why, here in Springfield, they’ve taken over the library board.

“*Norman:* Who’s taken over the library board?

“*Caller:* Mutants!

“*Norman:* You’re sure they’re mutants?

“*Caller:* Sure as I can be. They’re trying to put their kind of books in the library, where kids can see them.

“*Norman:* What kind of books?

“*Caller:* Genetics, evolution, trash like that.”

—excerpt from *The Walt Norman Show*

Though Paige had regained the nerve to call Norman's radio program, she had lacked the opportunity since they were sidetracked by Ranger Timmons. Sean and Emma had no other appointments in Montana, and Sean had decided to start riding in the Xabago to spell off on the driving, hoping to make better time.

At Paige's quiet insistence, they hadn't tuned in to Norman, even by accident. Angelo, at least, was cheerful about the whole thing. "We got the Xabago," he told her, "because the sound system rocked, and I was starting to think we'd spend the whole trip listening to AM talkazoids."

The system did rock, too, at a greater volume than Paige had expected to get away with, given the presence of an adult. An unexpected side effect of Sean's sonic powers seemed to be an immunity to loud music played at any volume, even if he didn't always approve of their choice of bands.

Jubilee eventually retreated to the comfort of the larger RV to get some quiet time, Angelo decided to take a nap on the couch, and Jono ensconced himself in the small bedroom in the back of the Xabago. Even Everett, back in the top-gun seat, appeared to be napping. Monet was curled up in the recliner, studiously working on what appeared to be a Smokey Bear coloring book.

Somewhere east of Billings, Sean discovered Monet's Devo CD among the clutter on the dash. He held it out to Paige, who was riding shotgun in the passenger seat. "Devo. This is the stuff they were playing back at M.O.N.S.T.E.R. house, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"Those kids're a good bunch. I admire their spirit."

"It's got to be hard for them, all by themselves out there."

"They aren't really alone, lass, none of us are. The X-Men, the school, that's just the tip of the iceberg. Professor Xavier knew he could never provide for the needs of all the mutants out there, so he helped establish a network, a mutant underground, to support the hundreds of mutants across the country and around the world. Now he wants to do more. That's what this trip is about, for Emma and me, anyway."

"But it's not like we can be open about it. We're hiding, all of us."

"I suppose that's true enough, as far as it goes."

"Our enemies don't have to hide. They get elected to Congress. They get on the television, the radio."

Sean gave her a concerned smile. "What brought this on, lass? You seem so dour. Aren't ye having a good time on the trip?"

Paige had a sudden panic that she was letting their secret slip through her fingers.

There was a stirring from the couch behind them, where Angelo had been napping. He looked up groggily, but evidently he had heard enough of the conversation to come to the rescue, in true Angelo style. "She's pining away about Jono. Young love. It ain't a pretty thing."

Paige didn't know if she should thank him or kill him, so she settled on ignoring him.

As for Sean, his expression was of someone who had stepped in something unpleasant. "Sorry, lass, didn't mean to pry." He noticed the Devo CD, still in his hand, and looked for a place to put it.

Monet appeared, leaning between the front seats and plucking it from his fingers.

Sean glanced back at her. "Sorry. Yours, lass? I didn't realize you like such music."

Monet plopped back into her seat and tucked the CD under her coloring book. "Are we not M?"

Angelo lifted his head and stared at her, his mouth open. Then he smiled broadly. "Mother help me, Monet made a funny. Who'd a thought?"

It was near midnight when Ivan pulled into a rest stop off I-90 and parked his car at the far end of the lot. He stepped out and walked purposefully toward the rest rooms, then dodged past the men's room door at the last moment. He stopped to take a drink from the water fountain and used the opportunity to make sure he wasn't being watched. Then he strolled into the truck parking area and to a familiar semitrailer parked among several others in the truck lot.

He stepped around the back and, careful not to be seen by passersby, tapped on the door. It swung open just enough for the steps to fold down, and he quickly climbed inside. The benches he had seen being installed earlier were now complete and fully equipped with tools and equipment.

He could see several technicians working in the background, including Dr. Bervin, who nodded to him, then went back to work on an electronic module. Though work on the package continued, he ignored it. That was not what he was here to see.

Instead, his attention was drawn to the far end of the bench, where a partially sculpted clay head was mounted on a turntable. The face was only vaguely human, with large, deeply set eyes, a wide, flattened nose, heavy brow ridges, and a large, thick-lipped mouth that projected out from the rest of the face, giving it a snoutlike appearance.

A man stood over the sculpture, a small wooden-handled tool in his hand. He was short, broad shouldered, and had a carefully waxed red handlebar moustache and goatee. As Ivan watched, the man leaned over, used the metal end of the tool to create some new lines under the eyes, then stood back to inspect his work. Ivan had not met him before, but knew him from photographs as Jimmy Scofield, the special effects man they'd hired from Hollywood.

Scofield looked up as he approached and smiled. "You must be the mysterious Ivan." He offered his well-manicured hand.

Ivan studied the large gold rings on pinky, index, and middle fingers, the silk shirt unbuttoned to show several loops of gold chain, and did not return the handshake. Ivan had no love of Hollywood or the American decadence that it represented. Plus, he had heard things about Scofield's troublesome personality, things that made it difficult for him to find work in the movie industry, things that had made him willing to take on unusual assignments such as this one. It was time to make sure that Scofield was firmly under his control, that there would be no problems.

Scofield stood awkwardly, his hand out, smile changing to a look of uncertainty. He quickly drew back the hand and wiped the palm on his jeans.

Ivan turned back to the sculpture. "It doesn't look female," he said.

"You said you wanted it ugly. After a certain point, it doesn't really make any difference. It's like putting an evening gown on the Hulk, you know?"

"Redo it."

Scofield looked horrified. "Are you crazy? You've got me on an impossible schedule already, trying to sculpt and do fine work while bouncing along in the back of this stupid truck. I've barely got time to finish this one."

"It will have a female voice. People must accept the illusion."

Scofield chuckled nervously. "Hey, illusions are my business. Trust me."

Ivan turned back to him, gave him the killing look. "I am trusting you, Mr. Scofield, and I am paying you well for that trust. Do not disappoint me. Do this work as though your life depends on it." He paused. "Because, trust *me*, it does."

Scofield stared at the sculpture as though he were seeing it for the first time. A sheen of sweat showed on his high forehead. "Yeah, it's kind of androgynous, but we'll give it nice long hair, and with the voice, that will sell it. Yeah, I'm sure it will."

Dr. Bervin walked up, the electronic module she had been working on in her hand.

Scofield looked at her gratefully, as though he'd been pulled from the edge of a cliff.

"I've been working on the movement dampers. I think we can program in a certain grace, despite the bulk of the thing, that should help."

"See," said Scofield, "it's not just me. It's the whole package."

Ivan was unrelenting. "Nonetheless, the responsibility for the illusion is yours, and yours alone. Do not disappoint."

"I won't."

"Of course."

Bervin handed him the module, which sat comfortably in the palm of his hand. A small speaker and a battery holder formed the bulk of the package, and since they were held to the circuit board with rubber bands, he assumed it was a temporary arrangement. She reached over and touched a tiny push-button with the tip of a red-polished fingernail.

The voice that came from the speaker was somewhat flat and spaced the words out unnaturally, like bricks in a wall, but it was recognizably that of "Peg," their young caller. "Death. To. Norman. Victory. For mutants. Over. All humans."

Bervin seemed to read his face, took the unit, and made a few adjustments, then handed it back to him. He pressed the tiny button himself.

This time the voice was higher pitched, faster. It sounded angry, or at least righteous. "Death to Norman! Victory for mutants over all humans!"

"The phrases here," she explained, "are just for demonstration purposes. The circuit will be tied to the control menu on the unit's status display, giving the operator a fair amount of flexibility."

He handed it back to her. "Good. Keep working on it. We need to move up our schedule. Our teenaged pawns have been making better time than we had expected."

"Impossible." Scofield ignored Ivan's angry look. "I have to finish the sculpture, then cure the molds, then pour and cure the latex, insert the hair, and attach the appliances to the unit and blend them in. There's only so much flexibility in the schedule. I can't change the laws of physics!"

Ivan glanced at Bervin, who was nodding. "I might give you the first unit, maybe the second if I cut some corners, but the whole package just can't be done any quicker than I promised."

Though Scofield seemed sincere in this case, Bervin was the only one he really trusted. "We may have to arrange some sort of delay for our young friends, and that complicates matters. Still, I'm sure the Expatriate will think of something to keep them entertained."

Paige rubbed her eyes and groaned. Boarding school life had made her soft. Back home, she'd been up with the chickens every morning. When she'd first come to the school, she'd been up jogging with the sun. These days, she wasn't really human until nine, then only with the help of caffeine. It was really time to make some lifestyle adjustments while her family might still recognize her.

The girls had rolled out of bed early so that Sean and Emma could peel off for an appointment in Rapid City, South Dakota, while the kids took the Xabago to Devils Tower National Monument, or, as Jubilee called it, "that *Close Encounters* place."

But with the exception of Jono, who was driving, most

everyone had just eaten a donut or two and was dozing again. It was kind of disgraceful, when she thought about it. Maybe turning on the radio would wake everyone up.

She moved to the front, carefully stepping over Everett's sleeping bag on the floor, not making eye contact with Jono. She bumped the passenger seat accidentally, and Monet blinked awake, quietly lifting the open calculus text that had been resting on her chest and returning to her reading.

Paige clicked on the radio and hit the scan button. Instead of music, the scan stopped on a news broadcast. There was a confused urgency in the female announcer's voice.

"—helicopter. Unconfirmed reports are that the assassin who fired on the President this morning while he was participating in a charity run is a known associate of the terrorist group the World Federalists."

Jono groaned. "Bleeding great. Norman will probably just blame it on a mutant." He reached for the radio, but Paige stopped him.

The announcer continued. There was obviously confusion at the station, and Paige realized they were listening to a live news bulletin, not a regular news show. *"As we have said, the President is safely on Marine One, the presidential helicopter, and being evacuated from the area. While some details are only still coming to light, one thing is clear: The hero of the hour is an obscure Arkansas costumed crimefighter who calls himself 'Razorback.' While jogging near the President, Razorback threw himself in the path of the bullet. Apparently some part of his costume stopped the slug harmlessly, and Razorback was able to disarm and hold the assassin for Secret Service agents."*

Angelo roused himself from under a blanket on the couch. "Razorback?"

Jubilee, who had earlier drawn the long straw to get the bed, appeared from the door in the back of the Xabago. "Razorback? What about him?"

Angelo looked surprised. "You've heard of this guy?"

She squinted and lowered the sunglasses from her forehead. "Yeah, I saw him on an episode of *America's Strangest Super Heroes*. Wears a huge pig head with tusks or something. Serious fashion victim. Drives a custom truck called the Big

Fig. We are talking lamest of the lame here. Whassup with that?"

Angelo shook his head and chuckled. "Mr. Pigback just saved the President's life. All of a sudden he's practically Captain America."

They listened to the radio again. *"We have now learned that Razorback's real name is Buford T. Hollis. Well known in the region, Hollis has a reputation both as a crimefighter and for his support of charity events such as this one."* A pause. *"We've just received word that the President has called Razorback from an undisclosed location to thank him personally, and that Razorback has been invited to the White House to meet the President face to face."*

"We repeat, an unsuccessful attempt on the President's life has been thwarted by costumed hero Razorback. A suspect is in custody, the President is safe, and America has a new—if unusual—hero."

Jono reached to turn down the radio, and this time Paige didn't stop him.

"So," said Angelo, "Mr. Pigback saves the President, and he's a hero. The X-Men save the world, and they're outlaws. I don't get that."

"Razorback," corrected Paige.

"Yeah, whatever. This guy wears a pig on his head?"

Jubilee nodded and went to fish a soda out of the fridge. "With tusks, or whatever, like a wild boar or something."

Angelo snorted, obviously finding it hard to visualize. "So, is that his secret? Get some geek-show gimmick and people will love you?" He suddenly grabbed a handful of his scalp in either hand and pulled the skin out to arm's length, distorting his head into an inverted triangle. "Look at me. I am Cheese Head, defender of justice." He let go of his scalp, which snapped back into place, then reached up to pat Jono on the shoulder. "Allow me to introduce my companion, Broiler Boy. Together, we are cheese toast against evil!"

Jubilee cracked up, and Paige found herself laughing as well.

"I'm serious," he claimed. "These codenames we got are all wrong." He looked at Paige. "Like 'Husk.' How about—Banana Peel. 'Slip on over to the right side.'" He looked at Jubilee. "Or Spark Plug. Motto: 'Don't—'"

Jubes held up a finger, crackling with energy. "Don't go there, Angelo."

He held up his hands in surrender.

Paige slumped against the wall. "Let's face it, the reason he's a hero and the X-Men aren't, that we aren't, is because he isn't a mutant."

Paige heard a zipper, and Everett crawled out of his sleeping bag. "He is a mutant," Everett said.

"No way," said Jubilee.

"Way," said Everett. "Back at the school, I've been studying up on all the files on known mutants, in case I needed to, you know, synch with them someday. He's in there. His power is—" he drew his knees up to his chin and thought for a minute "—he instinctively knows how to operate any vehicle. Yeah, that's it. I'm sure of it."

Jubilee picked up her Danger-boy and fiddled with the controls. "If he's a publicly visible mutant or in any way associated with the X-Men, he should be in the database here."

Angelo tilted his head and scowled. "What? That's it? He has the mutant power to drive? Oh, man, no wonder he wears a pig head. Maybe he should try a paper bag."

A small figure appeared on the Danger-boy's holostage. "He is in here, look!" It was a man, built like a wrestler, wearing a green-and-yellow costume and the previously described headpiece.

"He drives," repeated Angelo. "That's all?"

Everett shook his head. "Any vehicle. Truck, car, aircraft carrier, space shuttle."

Angelo brightened. "Well, that's convenient, in case you need to chase down a villain, and the only thing handy is a Rose Parade float."

Jubilee snickered. "Or a 1928 Porter. Or a Spider-Mobile. Or a Big Wheel. Or one of those little cars at Disneyland."

Paige wasn't laughing though. She was thinking. "So," she finally said, "this guy is a mutant, and they—" she gestured at the radio "—they don't know."

Jubilee held up the Danger-boy. "The database is of mutants known publicly, not publicly known mutants. There's, like, a difference. Get it?"

Angelo considered this. "So, what you're saying is, Mr. Pig Hero is a closet mutant?"

Paige nodded.

Angelo shook his head sadly. "He gets to talk to the President, gets to be a Betty with the media, all because he doesn't tell 'em he's a mutant? Man, that sucks."

"Sucks rocks," agreed Jubilee.

They were all quiet for a while—stunned, really. Sometimes, things just didn't make any sense at all.

The Expatriate considered the e-mail on his screen. By all rights, he should simply delete it and move on to more important business. The message was from the World Federalists, a desperate request for advanced weaponry, including automatic rifles, rocket launchers, and a helicopter.

Not that the Expatriate couldn't provide these things. In fact, all the items except the helicopter were in stock in the Idaho warehouse, and the helicopter could easily be diverted from one of several legitimate sources, its identifications removed, and be delivered within a day's time.

The problem was the World Federalists themselves. When he'd started dealing with them, they'd been well financed and well organized, even if their political aims were confused and unclear. Their basic philosophy was that the United States possessed too much of the world's wealth and that it should be forcibly distributed to poorer countries, but the details shifted like the wind. They'd recently lost several of their leaders to an internal struggle and a federal raid on one of their compounds. Since then, their fortunes and their strategy had been in a death spiral. They were desperate to pull off some spectacular terrorist act with which to deliver their poorly defined political message, but they lacked the resources or the leadership to do so.

The Expatriate had reluctantly supplied them with automatic weapons and explosives for use in the Seattle airport raid, but only because he could use it as a distraction for his own smuggling operation. It had come as a complete surprise when only days later they'd made their bungled and ill-conceived attempt on the President's life. Now they had an impossible plan to hold the Washington Monument hostage, which, if allowed to proceed, would certainly be the end of the organization.

But perhaps, as with the airport situation, there was some way to use the World Federalists for his own purposes. He considered his present situation. Norman was relatively con-

tent at the moment. Though the mutant girl had not called in a number of days, the listeners seemed nearly as happy to talk about her as to actually listen to her. Better than half the calls related either directly to her, or to issues raised in her calls, and Norman was expertly milking anticipation of her next call. In some ways, it was better to delay her next call, not to overuse their golden goose.

The package was moving to Chicago on schedule, but the young mutants were moving faster than anticipated. In order to insure that the package could be put into working order and arrive first, a delaying tactic was necessary. While an attempt on the Washington Monument would not help him, there were other, more suitable monuments that would better serve.

He removed a plastic laminated map from his top desk drawer and spread it over his keyboard. His finger traced Interstate 90 east from Seattle. The young mutants had been following it, with detours for major tourist destinations along the way. His finger stopped over South Dakota.

The Expatriate consulted an encrypted file on his computer, then dialed an outgoing number that routed the call through a series of numbers, and finally through a switchboard belonging to the network's corporate parent. Finally he dialed an outside number. It rang for nearly five minutes before the line was picked up, but no voice answered the call. The Expatriate spoke a codeword which, after a brief hesitation, was answered with a countersign.

"This is the Expatriate. Let me speak to the field marshal."

Another pause, then a voice, deep and scratchy, came on the line. "Why are you calling here? This number was for an emergency only."

"Your survival seemed emergency enough. I've considered your order. It may be possible, but only if the objective and timetable are changed to my specifications."

"Who do you think you are, dictating terms to us?"

"I may not be the only supplier who *could* deliver what you ask for, but I am the only supplier who *will*. Besides, I think, once you consider my proposed objective, you'll see that it is even better than what you had in mind."

"What objective?"

"Consider it, then contact me within the hour for the details. The objective is Mt. Rushmore." He hung up the phone, and sat back to wait.

. . .

The Xabago rounded a tight curve among scrubby evergreens, and Jubilee grabbed on to a kitchen counter to keep from falling over. "Jono, slow down. You're going to make me lose my breakfast before I even get to eat any."

Jono wasn't impressed. "Shag off."

"I'm serious, Jono. I'm gonna blow serious chunks here."

Monet looked up from behind another book, something in Latin this time, made a sour face, and then sank safely back behind its heavy cover.

Everett looked down from the top-gun seat with concern. "You okay, Jubilee?"

Angelo smirked. "She's just jerking Jono's chain. She should have eaten breakfast with the rest of us this morning, and now she wants us all to take a break while she gets her eats."

Jubilee opened a kitchen cabinet and looked through the assortment of cereal boxes there. "I just can't handle flapjacks and sausage, that whole logger scene, first thing in the morning. The only sausage I want to look at is on cold pizza."

Paige was sitting on the floor fiddling with the Danger-boy. "Pizza? Ugh. Where I come from, we eat real breakfast every morning, fried eggs, sausage, bacon, home fries, grits, hot biscuits with gravy. *That's* breakfast."

"That's cholesterol city, that's what it is," replied Jubilee. "It's no wonder your whole family is full of mutants. Where I come from, when you call the pizza joint, you're ordering tonight's dinner, and tomorrow's breakfast." Jubilee pulled down a cereal box, which promptly fell on its side as they hit a pothole. "Jono!"

He was unrelenting, hunched over the wheel watching both road and sky. "Bad weather moving in, gel. Got to make good time if we want to see Devils Tower before it hits."

She poured some cornflakes into a large coffee mug. "Well, at least ease up while I pour the milk, 'kay?"

"Hey," shouted Everett, "I can see it!"

"Where?" Jubilee quickly set the mug in the sink and climbed up so she could see out through the bubble. Everett pointed out through the trees. It was gray and hazy, and at first all she could make out was mist. Then she saw it, lurking in the fog: impossibly large, straight sided, flat topped, looking

more like some misplaced shrine than a mountain. Jubilee felt a little butterfly in her stomach, and had to admit that she was impressed, despite herself. "That is so cool."

Paige climbed up in front so she could see too. Angelo leaned over from his spot on the couch to get a glimpse. "Looks like a big bar stool."

Paige frowned back at him. "Shut up, Angelo."

He shrugged. "It's just a big rock."

"I read," said Everett, "that this is a sacred place to the Indians, that only when the white settlers saw it was it associated with evil."

Angelo squinted out though the windshield skeptically. "Okay, an evil big rock."

"Looks more sacred to me," said Jubilee.

Angelo stretched out on the couch. "Sacred rock. Evil rock. The bottom line is, rock."

Monet just looked at her book, ignoring everything.

"M," said Jubilee, "aren't you even going to look?"

"No."

"You are so cold, girl. Isn't there anything you want to see on this trip?"

"The prairie dog town."

"Get real."

She looked over her book, an expression of annoyance on her face. "Is there anything wrong with that? Angelo is right. A rock is a rock. A tree is a tree. All I've seen so far is that America has a lot of both of them, and I already knew that. I don't see any reason to get misty eyed over every new one that comes around the bend."

"Hey!" Everett was looking back over his shoulder. "We've got company."

Jubilee looked back and saw a familiar pink dinosaur of a car following them. "Chin up, Paige, the musketeers are back."

Paige looked up in response. Jubilee could see Jono watching her in the rearview. *When are those two gonna drop the soap opera?*

Jubilee turned back to the Tower, now becoming clearer through the mist, its sides raked with vertical striations, as though the thing had been clawed out of solid rock by the talons of some great monster. They passed into a flat, open

area, and Jubilee realized that it was the prairie dog town they'd read about in the brochures. She decided not to mention that Jono was driving right on through it in his haste to get to the Tower. They drove past the park headquarters and wound their way around the Tower to the visitors' center.

Jono parked the RV and Jubilee saw the Cadillac park nearby. Everyone piled out, except Monet, who continued to read her book. Jubilee paused in the door. The musketeers had joined up, and the bunch of them were engaged in an impromptu footrace to reach the visitors' center. Jubilee looked back at Monet. She was a big pain most of the time, but even Angelo was having some fun on this trip, even Paige and Jono, who spent half the time sulking about each other. The only way Monet could be avoiding it, Jubilee figured, was by sheer force of will.

She climbed back into the camper, and stood in front of Monet's recliner, hands on hips. "Come on. I know it's only a rock, but you could come and look with us anyway."

She didn't glance up from her book. "We drove past the prairie dogs."

"I didn't think you'd noticed."

"I notice everything."

Except when you're zoned out, thought Jubilee, but she kept quiet about it. She reached down and grabbed Monet by the wrist. "Come on. Be one of the gang."

Monet put down the book and gave her a long-suffering expression. "You aren't going to leave me alone unless I come, are you?"

"Nope."

She signed loudly. "All right, if that's the way it's going to be." She stood and let Jubilee lead her out of the RV. As they crossed the parking lot, Monet plodded along behind her, head down, not looking at the Tower.

They reached an observation area where the rest of them were clustered. Paige was peering at the tower through a coin-operated telescope while Recall looked on admiringly. Jono was off to the side, talking with Angelo and studiously ignoring the whole scene. Angelo was using the remaining image inducer, now reprogrammed to project his usual unmutated Hispanic persona.

Monet was looking restlessly back toward the parking area.

"M, we're here. Least you can do is look at the big rock. Don't be totally pigheaded about this. 'Lax up.'"

Monet reluctantly looked up at the tower, then blinked. She looked, eyes growing wider. Her mouth opened silently and her stare grew in intensity.

"Oh, no," said Jubilee, "she's doing it again."

The others looked their way and saw what was going on. Paige walked over from the telescope, a curious Recall following her. "She does this," explained Paige, "just goes into a trance for a while." Paige noticed a couple of older women staring at Monet. "Usually it isn't so conspicuous."

Jubilee, aware that they were attracting attention, looked down to avoid making eye contact with anyone. What she saw didn't make her happy at all. Monet's feet were floating a good two inches off the ground. She leaned closer to Paige and whispered urgently. "Paige, she's starting to lift off. We've got to stop her."

Paige glanced down and saw what she was talking about, then looked to see who else was watching.

Jubilee heard the two women talking to each other, and caught the word *mutant*.

"Too late," said Paige. "Let's just try to keep her out of any more trouble." But as they turned around, they saw they were too late for that as well. Monet was gone. They looked up to see her drifting fifteen feet above their heads, arms outstretched, wrists relaxed. As they watched, she slowly picked up speed and altitude, heading toward the Tower.

"Oh, crud," said Paige. "I wish Sean were here. It's not like any of us can fly after her."

"Not true," said Paige. She waved Everett over. "Synch up with Monet and fly after her."

Everett looked nervously at the crowd of people around. "I don't know if I should. Bad enough one of us has blown cover without me doing it too. Besides," he added, "I've synched with M a couple times before, but it's always weird, like eating too much ice cream too fast. Just doesn't feel right."

Paige looked up. Monet was only a dot against the sky now, but she was turning, and seemed to be flying around the Tower. "Maybe he's right. Let's just hope she snaps out of it and comes back. Meanwhile, let's split up and try not to look like we're together. Jubilee, if you see anyone snapping pic-

tures, try to quietly fog their film with a few sparks, if you can. Everybody else, mingle." She grabbed Recall by the arm and took off into the gathering crowd.

Chill and Dog Pound strolled off toward the bathrooms. Synch pretended to be intently studying an informational plaque. Jubilee followed orders and wandered through the crowd, "accidentally" bumping into people taking pictures, brushing their cameras with her fingertips and projecting a few tiny sparks each time. With luck, they'd get home to find nothing but her fireworks in their vacation shots.

Having made the rounds, she returned to the railing, and looked anxiously out at the Tower. She stared for several minutes, before spotting a moving dot around on the far side. It grew closer until it was recognizably a flying person, then looped back around the Tower and flew away again. Behind the Tower, a wall of black clouds was approaching, and as Jubilee watched, it was illuminated by a flash of lightning. "Oh, great," she said to nobody in particular, "the mother ship is here." Jubilee shoved her hands in her pockets and chewed her lower lip, feeling responsible for Monet's condition. What would happen if the thunderstorm hit before she came back?

She spotted Paige sitting on a bench talking to a thirty-something woman wearing jeans and a red tank top. The woman seemed to be crying. Recall stood a few feet away, looking very uncomfortable. *The hell with mingling.* She went over to see what was going on. Paige looked up as she approached. "Her little boy wandered off while they were hiking," she explained. "The rangers are looking for him now, but the storm is coming, and they can't use airplanes."

"He was right there," said the woman to herself as much as anyone. "We just turned our back for a second, and he was gone. We looked and looked, but he was gone."

Jubilee stared out at the Tower, not seeing Monet. "If only M were here, she could search for him." Lightning flashed, and almost at once, thunder rumbled around them.

"You were talking about me?"

Monet floated down out of the sky and alighted next to Jubilee.

"Am I glad you're back," Jubilee exclaimed.

Monet looked grave. She glanced back at the Tower. "I'm sorry. It's like it was pulling at my soul."

Jubilee grabbed her by the arms. "Don't go getting cosmic on us. There's a kid lost out there somewhere. You've got to find him."

She looked at the approaching storm. "There isn't much time."

Paige seemed to have an inspiration. "Recall, can you tune in on the lost boy?"

He looked uncertain. "I've been listening to her talk. Like I said, I have to know what I'm looking for." He turned to the woman. "Do you have a picture you could show me?"

The woman had been staring, openmouthed, at Monet since her unexpected return. "You're mutants, aren't you?"

Paige looked her straight in the eye. "Yes, ma'am. Don't be afraid. We can help, if you'll let us."

She seemed to make a decision, and started digging in her purse, fishing out what looked like a small school snapshot of a round-faced boy in a red sweater. She handed it to Recall.

Monet edged closer. "Can you tell me where he is?"

He studied the picture, rubbing it between thumb and forefinger. "No, but I can take you to him."

She stepped behind him, put her hands under his arms. "Let's go, then."

Angelo and Jono walked up. Jono looked skeptically at the tearful mother. He glanced at Monet and Recall. "Just don't expect any bleeding gratitude if you find the kid," he projected his words tightly, so the woman wouldn't pick them up. "It doesn't work that way."

M and Recall rocketed into the air, arcing over backward before they headed toward the Tower. Angelo looked at the mass of people around them. "So much for our cover," he muttered.

Trying to look inconspicuous, Jubilee lowered her sunglasses despite the gloom, and pulled the collar of her raincoat up around her face. What followed was a long and uncomfortable twenty minutes, as the storm continued to bear down, and they found themselves surrounded by a skeptical and possibly hostile mob of humans.

Then they heard someone in the crowd shout, and a murmur ran through the group. People were pointing at the sky, and

Jubilee finally pushed past enough people to see M returning, something large under each arm.

M swooped down, and the crowd parted to give her space to land. She was holding Recall around the waist under one arm, and under the other, the missing boy. The mother ran past Jubilee and swept him away from M even before her feet touched the ground. The woman dropped to her knees, hugging the boy, crying.

M put down Recall, who brushed himself off and adjusted his rumpled clothes. "That was not dignified," he said.

The woman looked up at Recall, as though seeing him for the first time. She jumped to her feet and gave him a bear hug. Recall stood stiffly, looking stunned. Next the woman turned her attention to M, hugging her and kissing her on the cheek.

The crowd buzzed. Two rangers and a muscular man dressed in khakis, whom Jubilee presumed to be the boy's father, pushed through the mob of onlookers. The man stopped in front of Recall, looked him up and down, then shook his hand heartily.

Then somebody clapped. Some others joined in. Suddenly the onlookers were applauding. The boy, who seemed more excited at the attention than scared, held his fists over his head and jumped up and down. Jubilee caught a glimpse of Jono, who looked stunned. She slid up next to him and leaned close. "What have we learned here, Mr. Cynical?"

He turned, his eyes flashing with anger. "That if you have to be a mutant, you shouldn't be an ugly one." He turned, pushing his way unnoticed through the crowd, headed back toward the RV.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



“Details continue to surface concerning the surprising life of Buford T. Hollis, the heroic costumed adventurer now known to Americans as Razorback. The public’s curiosity about its latest hero seems insatiable, and truly the story seems worthy of their interest. Hollis has been a star athlete, trucker, adventurer, humanitarian, friend to controversial costumed superhuman Spider-Man, cult buster, and even, according to our exclusive sources, astronaut on a top-secret NASA space mission. Tune in tonight at ten eastern for a special report, *Razorback: the Man, the Hero, the Mystery*.

“In other news, a possible mutant mystery in Wyoming. Conflicting eyewitness reports from Devils Tower National Monument that the disappearance of a six-year-old boy from a park hiking trail may have somehow involved a mysterious ‘flying girl.’ Despite many eyewitnesses, it isn’t clear if the boy was actually abducted or rescued by the mystery girl, or indeed if she exists at all.

“It is certain that the boy was separated from his parents for several hours and later returned unharmed. The child’s parents, vacationers from Eugene, Oregon, refused to comment, and park officials would confirm only that the boy had been reported missing and later recovered. An unnamed source on the House Mutant Affairs Committee claims that telepathic mind control could be the source of the confusion.”

—excerpt from WNN news report

A covered picnic shelter at a roadside park formed a rustic debriefing room for the students of Xavier's School. A large concrete-and-wood picnic table occupied the center of the shelter, its log roof supported by columns made of unshaped native stone. Paige stood nervously at the head of the table where the rest of the students sat, watching, as she explained what had happened at Devils Tower. Sean paced, listening intently. Emma stood off to the side, arms crossed, an impassive and unreadable figure.

She finished by recounting how they'd asked the assembled crowd not to tell anyone what had happened, had retreated to their vehicles, and made a hasty departure to spend the night at an undeveloped campground off the main roads.

Sean stopped in midpace, and she felt as if his clear blue eyes could see right through her. She braced herself for the chewing out that would certainly follow.

Then Sean cracked a smile. "Paige, lass, only you would think of asking a hundred strangers to keep a secret and expect that it could work."

She felt herself blushing.

"The devil of the thing, no pun intended, is that it does seem to've worked, if only well enough t'muddy things so the press doesn't know what it was that happened."

She looked up, surprised. "Then we aren't in hot water?"

"There was somebody in trouble, and you saw how you could help where nobody else could. That's what the X-Men do, what Xavier's dream is all about. Ordinarily, I wouldn't advocate your going off without some backup, especially with such an audience as that, but ye did the best that ye could under the circumstances." He glanced at Emma. "Ye did a good job of covering your tracks, even without scrambling anyone's brains." He nodded. "Ye did good."

Paige glanced at Emma, who seemed less enthusiastic than Sean, but she nodded.

Sean turned to Monet. "But as for you, lass, we've got to get a doctor to look at ye about these spells of yours."

Monet looked alarmed. "I don't need any doctor. I'm fine."

"Lass, we can't keep lettin' things like this happen."

Monet hung her head, and Paige thought that, for once, she looked very helpless, and very young. Even Jubilee looked

worried about her. "It was just the Tower," said Monet. "It called to me in a way I can't explain."

Emma looked thoughtful. "It's a very sacred place to the Native Americans. I've seen too much to simply dismiss such things, especially where telepaths are concerned."

Monet was too cowed to even deny it. "It was just that, somehow, the Tower reminded me of my brother."

Paige didn't even think of questioning this. Considering that Monet's brother was some kind of supernatural, hyperdimensional, mutant vampire, nothing about Monet and her family was too weird to be true.

"Well," said Sean, "maybe when we get back, I'll ask Hank McCoy for a scientific opinion."

"Maybe," said Monet.

Sean looked slightly uncomfortable. "Well, we're not gettin' near a doctor or anything else for a few days, that's for sure. That little show at the Tower got far more attention than I'd be wanting, so we'll camp around south of the interstate for a few days before going on to Rushmore. Let things cool off before we make another appearance. What's say we get back to the campers and make some lunch." He waved his arms. "Dismissed, the lot of ye."

The kids headed back toward the parking lot, Emma tagging behind at a more sedate pace. Sean waited for everyone else to leave before following, but Paige lingered. She'd figured they'd be in trouble for what happened at the Tower, and now it had her thinking about everything else that was going on. She didn't like secrets, didn't like lies. For her, they were dead-end streets, and sooner or later you saw there was only one way out.

Sean saw something was bothering her. "Lass?"

"Can I ask you a question?"

He sat on the end of the rustic wooden picnic bench. "Sure an' you can. Have a seat."

She sat on the end of the other bench across the table from them. She used her fingernail to trace a pledge of love somebody had carved in the tabletop long ago. "You said we did the right thing out there, helping those people, but it really wasn't our business, was it?"

"I don't follow ye."

"I mean, nobody asked us for our help. It wasn't our prob-

lem. In fact, we had to put our necks on the line to do what we did. But it was still the right thing to do.”

He chuckled. “That’s a statement, not a question, lass.”

“But what if the circumstances were different? If we were aware of an injustice that was hurting a lot of people, and we could do something about it, it wouldn’t be right just to sit by and do nothing, would it? Even if it seemed a risky thing to do, and you weren’t sure how things would turn out?”

“Of course not. If there’s a chance you can make things better, then that’s what you should do. Not that I can imagine you ever letting such a thing go by ye. Y’r a good lass, with a good heart. Trust that heart, it will serve you when your head fails.”

She looked him in the eye. “Thanks. I’ve just been thinking about some decisions I’ve made in the past, wondering if I did the right thing, or if I was just being stupid.”

“Want to talk about it?”

She stood and shook her head. She brushed a strand of hair out of her face. “Maybe, once I get it all sorted out.” She turned and headed back toward the RV. “I expect you’ll hear all about it.”

According to Ivan’s odometer, it was three and one half miles beyond the padlocked gate up a rutted and unpaved road to the abandoned ranch complex that the Expatriate had provided to the World Federalists as a staging area. As he drove up to the farmhouse, he could see an unmarked cargo helicopter, disguised by camouflage netting, parked near the barn. Through the barn’s open door, he could see that the interior had been converted into a bivouac for a group of bored-looking commandos who sat around an improvised table playing some kind of dice game.

He pulled to a stop in front of the farmhouse, and a broad-shouldered man dressed in dusty ranch-hand clothing, but with a decidedly military bearing, stepped out of the front door to meet him. The man was round faced and thick moustached. When he spoke, Ivan noticed a wide gap in his front teeth. “I am Field Marshall Duvall. The Expatriate told us to expect you.”

“The equipment arrived in good order?”

“Better than specified, actually. We are well satisfied in

every way except for the waiting. My men are ready to go. Why this unnecessary delay? We were reluctant to align ourselves with your Expatriate's unknown agenda. I still am."

Ivan studied Duvall. He had seen men like this before, small men with big ideas. The World Federalists had some plan to place the United States under the "democratic" control of Third-World nations so that it could be carved up like a roast. Much as he might dislike the Americans, Ivan recognized it for the absurd dream that it was.

His own Soviet Union had proved that the United States could not be toppled from without, no matter the forces against it. It could only be slowly poisoned from within, as was the Expatriate's dream. The idea that this relative handful of rag-tag commandos could be a true threat was comical. Still, they might serve the Expatriate's plan and, as a bonus, add to the climate of paranoia and distrust in which Walt Norman's show thrived.

But like all cannon fodder, they should be told no more than they needed to know about their coming demise.

"The Expatriate has been quite generous with you, my friend, only because your interests cross with his in this instance. If he considers it necessary to inform you of those interests, he will do so. Until then, it is only necessary to know that the timing of your operation is quite important to him. We are waiting for a trigger event, which should happen shortly, in order to give a go-ahead for the operation."

Duvall leaned against the hood of his car and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked neither impressed nor happy. "We have waited long enough. Every hour we wait simply increases the chances that we will be detected. We are going today."

Ivan took a step closer to him. "You will go when I give the word."

Duvall looked at him, smiled, then laughed. He took his weight off the car. "You do not understand. We have what we want. We have what we need. You have no leverage with us." He pointed at the open hayloft door of the barn. Ivan looked up and saw something glint there in the sun. "Sniper," explained Duvall. "One of several that have had their weapons trained on you ever since you passed through the gate. If you are troublesome, it would require only a movement of my

hand, or a threatening move on your part, to terminate our relationship."

Ivan slowly lifted his left hand up so that Duvall could see the small device clutched there, nearly hidden in his fist. "It is you who do not understand. The Expatriate has not gotten as far as he has without learning to anticipate. This is a radio transmitter with a dead-man switch. This ranch was a safe-house for our organization and, as such, was wired for destruction should it no longer be useful to us."

Duvall frowned. "What do you mean?"

"There is a crawlspace under that farmhouse. If you look underneath, you will see that it is packed with barrels. These are filled with explosives, wired to this switch. Should I relax my grip without taking certain precautions, this entire complex will be vaporized. There would be no time to run, and no place to run to. Trust me that, if they find any part of your body, it will not be in this state."

Duvall snorted. "You can't be serious."

"Go inspect the barrels yourself, but be very careful not to disturb anything."

"You would not do such a thing."

"If your operation goes off early, it is a total loss for the Expatriate, and I—I am expendable."

Duvall licked his lips and took a deep breath. "We will wait."

"Of course." Ivan smiled, just a little. He enjoyed these little games of bluff. The basement of the house was indeed packed with barrels, but they contained drinking water and emergency food, not explosives, and the device in his hand was a pocket pager, nothing more. As with many things, reality mattered less than what people thought.

Suddenly, the device in Ivan's hand began to beep. Duvall's eyes went wide, and Ivan thought for a moment that he might faint dead away. Ivan calmly looked at the display on the top of the pager. The code number there indicated that the young mutants had passed one of their listening posts and were on the way to Rushmore.

Ivan slid the pager into his coat pocket without explanation. "Good news, my friend. The time is now."

Devo's "Girl U Want" blared from the Xabago's speakers as Jono leaned on the wheel. On the road ahead, a solitary buffalo was taking its own sweet time crossing to the safety of the trees beyond. Jono was grateful that the girl he wanted was in the other RV following a few miles behind, that the passenger seat was empty, and that Everett and Angelo were, for the moment, leaving him some privacy with his thoughts.

He considered the irony, that he, a man without a face, was on his way to see four of the largest, most beloved faces in America. He had mixed feelings about it personally, especially about Washington and Jefferson. They were rebels, free thinkers, and revolutionaries, all qualities that he could admire, but they were also traitors to the Crown. It seemed to sum up the curious relationship between the U.S. and his own England. It made him think of storm-tossed gulfs that could never really be closed, only crossed, gulfs between countries, and gulfs between people. The whole thing was bloody depressing.

The bull bison, fully the size of Emma's sports car, paused at the edge of the road and stared at him with a baleful eye. Like him, it just wanted to be left alone. As he watched, the beast tossed its great head and ambled resentfully off the right of way and into the trees beyond.

Jono released the brake and began accelerating, uncertain if he was glad to have the moment end or not. For a second there, he thought the big animal and he had an understanding, a kind of mutual contempt that bordered on intimacy. *Dog Pound*, he thought, *isn't the only one who can commune with the animals.*

If only he could commune with Paige as easily. Right now, it didn't even seem as if he could talk with her. They communicated in uncomfortable silences, and Jono realized that it wasn't as different from his encounter with the buffalo as he'd initially thought.

But even if he could talk with her, he didn't know what he'd say to her. She was mad at him about Phaze, the genogoth he'd been dancing with back in Seattle, and part of him felt the anger was deserved. He'd enjoyed it, maybe a little too much. Ever since his power had first manifested itself by blowing his face and chest apart, he'd felt like a freak, isolated from even those closest to him. Even from Paige.

And here, suddenly, had been this stunning woman who

wasn't repelled by his disfigurement, but was turned on by it. She could look at him without pity, without flinching. She could look at him like she was hungry for him, and that was an intoxicating feeling. Part of him wanted to stay there in that guarded basement, shut out the world, and dance away till the end of time.

Later, thinking about it, he'd only gotten her name because he'd asked for it, and she'd never asked him his. He didn't think she'd cared. She wasn't attracted to who he was, only to what he was. Her behavior was, in its own way, worse than pity.

But by the time he'd realized how empty the moment had been, Paige was suddenly attracted to someone else, someone with everything going for him, including a face that didn't look like it had escaped from a horror movie. Jono didn't, couldn't, bring himself to hate Recall. Paige could do a lot worse, and more than anything, he wanted Paige to be happy. Never mind that losing her would tear him apart more thoroughly than his powers ever had.

"Girl U Want" had hit the chorus, and he reached over and slammed the CD eject button. The disc popped out, and it seemed that the machine was sticking its tongue out at him.

Everett looked up from the couch, where he was stretched out reading some magazine about hot-rodding Volkswagens twenty years older than he was. "Hey, I was listening to that."

"Well, I'm bloody sick of it."

"You're the one that put it on in the first place."

"I'll turn on the radio."

He adjusted controls and managed to find an AM station with only a little static. The announcer seemed to be in the middle of some sort of entertainment report. "*—once again headlines are being converted into ratings, with reports that the top three broadcast networks are in a bidding war for the rights to a new series to be called Buford and Taryn, the New Adventures of Razorback. The show will reportedly focus on the romantic rather than the heroic aspects of Razorback's life. Casting is not complete, but Tom Selleck—*"

Jono stabbed at the radio's power switch. "Bloody hell. That's all we need."

Everett again looked up from his magazine. "Ease off, Jono, you're gonna eject a warp core or something. Besides,

you'll wake Angelo. I let him ride in the top-gun seat, and in two minutes he's out like a light. Waste of a good view, if you ask me."

"I didn't." Jono said it, and immediately felt bad about it. Everett was just trying to help. He was always trying to help, trying to take care of all of them. "Hey, sorry about that, mate. Girl problems, you know?"

"I've got eyes. You want my advice?"

"Gonna get it anyway, aren't I?"

"Tell Paige how you honestly feel. Girls like that."

"You learn that on *Oprah*, or what?"

"Hey, you could learn a thing or two from Oprah," Everett said with mock indignation.

He was about to make some crack about being more at home with Jerry Springer when the view through the windshield totally derailed his train of thought. "Bloody hell."

Everett groaned and rolled off the couch. "What's set you off now?" Then he looked out and saw the police cars blocking the road ahead of them. As Jono pulled the Xabago in the end of a line of vehicles stopped at the roadblock, he could see Synch digging to find the image inducer and get it to Angelo. Jono could only hope this wasn't going to be an unhappier version of their encounter with Ranger Timmons. It would be too much to hope for two mutant-friendly cops on one road trip. Then he could see that they weren't just stopping traffic, they were turning it back.

Rather than reach the roadblock, Jono pulled the Xabago as far onto the shoulder as he could and parked. "Synch, get out and see if you can find out what's going on."

"Did I miss something?" asked Angelo, his voice still groggy.

Everett glanced up at him. "Only everything." He turned his attention back to Jono. "I can do better than that. I think Ms. Frost is close enough for me to synch her telepathy. I should be able to tune in one of those state troopers up there and—" His mouth made a little *O* and he blinked in surprise. "There are a bunch of terrorists at Mt. Rushmore. They've got hostages up there, and rocket launchers. If their demands aren't met, they're going to blow up Mt. Rushmore!"

"Demands," asked Angelo, "like money?"

Everett looked grave. "Like surrendering Florida to the Cubans."

The larger RV rolled in behind them, and Jono felt Emma's telepathic touch. *Synch's already relayed the situation to us. There's a turnoff a few miles back. We'll meet there. Meanwhile, get your uniforms on. This is going to be a business call.*

Jono glanced at Everett. "She was sending to us all. Oh, boy. Looks like Devils Tower was just a warm-up."

Angelo threw aside a seat cushion from the couch, found a uniform underneath, and sprinted for the back of the RV. Everett looked around for a few more moments before shouting after him, "Angelo, that's mine!"

As for Jono, he focused on the difficult job of getting the large rig turned around in a tight space. Drivers in both directions honked at him, but he tuned them out. In his mind, he was already at the mountain. Right now, Jonathan Evan Starsmore was just dazed and confused, but Chamber, Chamber was ready to kick some butt.

Ivan stood in the parking lot of a little store and gas station that catered to the tourist crowd. Signs advertised MAPS OF THE BLACK HILLS, PROPANE & PROPANE ACCESSORIES, and COFFEE ALWAYS HOT. The coffee, he observed as he took a sip of the dark, bitter fluid from a foam cup, was hot, if terrible by what he gathered were American standards. His tastes were for dark and bitter, and roadside establishments like this were generally accommodating.

This cup was especially satisfying, practically a victory banquet for him. Radio triangulation showed that the mutants' vehicles were both stationary off the road and only a few miles from Mt. Rushmore. Days of work and planning had come to fruition, the timing had been perfect, and their targets had taken the bait.

The Expatriate had said that mutants found it impossible to avoid meddling in such things, and it appeared he was right. It seemed certain that the young mutants' arrival in Chicago would now be delayed. He only hoped the World Federalists weren't lucky enough to kill any of them, or at least not the girl known to Walt Norman's listeners as Peg.

Chamber tugged at his boots as he climbed out of the Xabago and joined the rest of the group. They formed up outside the Xabago, the kids in their red school uniforms, Sean in his black-and-yellow Banshee uniform, striped wing panels connecting arms to ribs. Only Emma had not changed, her trim white suit enough of a uniform for her purposes.

"We'll make an airborne assault," said Banshee. "Synch, M, and I are the transport. M, can you carry both Husk and Jubilee?"

She nodded. "Of course."

He continued. "I'll carry Chamber and Synch will take Skin."

"I'll coordinate things from here," said Emma. That surprised Chamber. Emma wasn't one to shy from action. She continued, "Indications are that the terrorists and hostages are scattered all over the park. I'll try to scan for them and avoid any surprise encounters. This situation is much less contained and controlled than Seattle. These people are heavily armed, and I won't be able to protect you the way I did back there. Don't take any chances."

"With the hostages," added Banshee, "or yourselves. Let's go."

Banshee stood behind Chamber and locked his arms around him. There was a noise like a jet engine warming up six inches behind his head before the sound faded into a supersonic thrum that he felt more than heard. They were airborne.

They flew below the forest canopy to avoid detection, Banshee popping up above the trees only occasionally, just long enough to get a vector on the mountain. More than once, Chamber found himself pulling up his feet or swinging side to side to avoid a branch or a treetop. It was not a comfortable way to travel. Fortunately, it was only a few miles.

They put down outside the park, just before the trees opened up. Ahead of them was a paved service road of some kind, and a cluster of older buildings. Ahead and to his right, he could see the sculpture clearly for the first time, sixty-foot granite faces looking down calmly, unaware or unafraid of the danger they now faced. He tried to imagine them blown to bits, falling down the mountain in house-sized chunks.

"That's the sculptor's studio up ahead," said Synch, "where the artist had his models and plans and stuff."

"Emma," whispered Banshee, "what are we up against?"

Chamber heard her telepathic reply. *There are terrorists and hostages in the studio. Also at least three other groups, including a big one in the gift shop. I think that's where most of the hostages are. It's hard to read there because of the psychic confusion. A small group in the administration building—that's their field headquarters, I think. Also more troops and a few hostages up at an amphitheater of some kind. There are rocket launchers there aimed at the mountain.*

Banshee thought on that for a moment. "Three teams. M, you're with me. We'll take out their command post, then go after the rocket launchers. Synch, Skin, Jubilee, take the gift shop. Chamber, Husk, take the studio."

Jono looked at Paige and almost cringed. Banshee was thinking militarily, codenames, powers, and resources, not personalities, or he'd not have paired the two of them. *Well, I'll just have to make the best of it.*

Banshee continued. "If your target is secure, move on to the amphitheater. Emma, Synch seems to know the layout of this place. Can you telepathically spread the information around?"

Chamber suddenly felt alien memories intruding in his head, of looming adults, older brothers and sisters, a station wagon with the windows down driving through the trees, and of holding a tiny plastic replica of the sculpture in childish hands that were brown instead of pale pink. It was a strange sensation, but he thought he could find his way around the park now.

"Husk, Synch, I want ye both to 'husk' into something bulletproof. It will be up to you two and M to take the point for your respective teams and protect the rest of us from gunfire."

Husk crossed her arms across her chest, grabbed the skin of her shoulders in her hands, and ripped. Underneath, her skin was like polished marble. Chamber hoped that was bulletproof enough. Paige didn't always have total control over her transformations. Synch linked with her powers and did the same, managing the same chrome steel appearance she had used back in Idaho.

"Let's go," ordered Banshee. He and M lifted off, then dived and flew away in the direction of the parking lot, their bodies just a foot or so above the ground. Doubtless they'd

use their superior speed to loop around the parking areas and hit the headquarters from the rear.

With Synch in the lead, he, Jubilee, and Skin started a duck-and-cover run across the complex, headed for the gift shop.

Jono and Paige just stared uncomfortably at each other for a while. Given that they were closest to their objective, they needed to stall to give the others time to get clear.

Finally, she said, "Come on, Jono. Let's just do this."

He nodded, and they crept up to the back of the largest building. The first door was locked. The second, marked PARK STAFF ONLY, was not. "I'll go in first," said Husk, "draw their fire. You take out the terrorists."

She pushed the door, and he braced for a squeak, but it unlatched with a barely audible click and swung silently inward.

This is it. Show time.

Synch, Jubilee, and Skin made their way stealthily across the center of the compound, using landscaping, trash cans, tree trunks, and anything else they could find for cover. Though Synch was the nominal point man, Jubilee—as the smallest and most agile of the three—found that she made the best time across the relatively open area, occasionally staying put for a while so that the others could catch up. It was on one such occasion when she was crouched behind a trash barrel, knees hugged to her chin, that she became aware of a sentry.

Actually, she didn't see the sentry. Perhaps Skin did, but at any rate, thanks to Emma's telepathic contact she knew exactly where he was, and if she moved so much as a millimeter, he'd see her. She could see Skin ahead of her, running in a crouch and ducking behind a bench. She could clearly see him, but he was hidden from the guard.

He seemed to have something in his hand about the size of a baseball, and when he held it up, she could see that it was a rock. As she watched, Skin held up his left forearm horizontally in front of his body. He cupped the rock in a flap of slate-colored skin on the back of his arm, and slowly pulled it back about a foot. Then he popped up just long enough to aim and release the rock. His elastic skin formed a makeshift but effective slingshot. The rock swished by just a few inches

in front of the guard's face and clanged off a metal light standard behind him.

It wasn't until she peeked around to see the guard turn away from them toward the noise, that Jubilee realized Skin hadn't missed. The rock had gone right where he'd wanted it to. The muzzle of the guard's rifle/grenade launcher sought a target in the wrong direction.

Something glittering streaked in from the guard's left. It was Synch. The guard turned, bringing around the weapon, but Synch hit him like a bowling ball. The man fell with a barely audible curse, and the gun went spinning up into the air.

Though she knew she'd never reach it in time, she lunged for the gun, knowing that if the grenade launcher went off, it could be the end of them. She made a flying leap. The rifle seemed to go by her hands in slow motion, just a few feet beyond her grasp, when Skin's fingertips shot out and wrapped themselves around the gun, like a chorus of frog's tongues trying to bring down an airplane.

She hit the grass, did a forward roll, and came up on her feet. She turned to see a smiling Skin, the rifle's strap around his neck, examining his prize.

She glanced around for other guards, but they seemed safe for the moment. Synch was dragging the unconscious guard behind a shrub. She turned back to Skin, who seemed quite taken with the gun. "Do you know how to use that thing?" Her voice was just above a whisper.

He looked up in surprise. "No idea, but don't it look cool?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Not especially, but maybe it will scare somebody who should be scared."

Synch slid in next to her. "If it's any consolation, I'm scared. The gift shop is right there, and I think I see a back way in."

Jubilee stooped low and trotted toward the back of the building. "Let's go shopping."

Banshee and M crouched between a pair of National Park Service trucks, watching the entrance to the administration building. Banshee had spotted four guards standing near the doorway, all heavily armed. Were it not for the hostages inside, M could have taken them easily, but doing it with some degree of stealth presented more of a problem.

Banshee studied the weapons. "One of them has a modified AK-47, but the others are carrying Genoshan assault combines. I'd love to know where they got those."

M looked at him for guidance. "What do we do?"

"Don't get in the way of one of those combines, that's for sure. They have a laser-guided rocket launcher under the barrel. Ye may think you're invulnerable, but taking a rocket at point-blank range is not a smart way to test it."

"Then what?"

He looked at the truck behind them. "We stop thinking like mutants, and start thinking like soldiers. When I give the signal, give this truck a push."

He scooted around the back of the truck, being careful not to be seen, quietly opened the door, and released the parking brake. "Now," he hissed.

With Monet's strength, it took only one hand to get the truck rolling at a fast walking pace. Keeping low, he ducked past the tailgate of the driverless vehicle as it passed by. He heard the guards shouting at one another.

He'd found a screwdriver on the floor of the truck's cab, and knelt down next to the other truck and quickly pried off a hubcap. "Ever throw a Frisbee?" he asked as he handed the metal disk to M and duck-walked to the rear wheel.

He could see two of the guards running after the truck. He jimmied loose the other hubcap and handed it to M. "See if you can take the two on the steps, then go for the hostages."

He darted back along behind the truck, pausing just long enough to watch the two silver disks slice through the air and find their targets. One bounced off a guard's forehead and he fell like a rag doll. The other had turned back toward the door, and was struck in the back of the neck. He was thrown face first against the door and slid down to the step.

The other two guards didn't realize what had happened yet. One of them had the truck's door open and was trying to climb in. Sean ignored him and leapt into the air after the other one. He hit the man like a missile and took him down hard. He landed on the man's chest, grabbed his ears, and slammed his head into the concrete hard enough to render him unconscious.

He saw M duck into the front door of the building. The guard in the truck had finally realized what was going on and jumped from the cab of the truck, which rolled on down the

drive. The man fell on his gun, struggled to bring it to firing position.

Banshee was in the air again, going away from where he really wanted to go, but the man couldn't be allowed to fire. If he did, the whole compound would know what was up. They'd only suspect it when the truck hit whatever it was eventually going to hit.

The man was bringing the weapon up just as Banshee got close enough to strike him with focused subsonics. The guard grabbed his ears, his eyes rolled back in his head, and he fell.

Banshee did a snap loop and headed back toward the administration building as fast as he could fly. There was no telling what kind of trouble M was having inside. He landed, taking the AK-47 from a fallen guard, and jumped through the door ready for anything.

M appeared from a doorway, smiling. "The hostages are safe back there. I disabled all the guards, but I think the leader got out a window."

Something clattered behind them. Banshee spun in time to see an office door open, and a frightened-looking terrorist emerge with one of the assault combines aimed right at them. M stepped in front of him, but the man must have been more rattled than Banshee realized. Startled by M's sudden advance, he fired the rocket launcher.

There was no time for him to do anything, but M was faster than that, moving in a blur, meeting the rocket halfway, trying to fold her body around it.

He missed the explosion somehow, finding himself lying on the floor, his leg pinned under a fallen filing cabinet. For a second, just a second, he thought he was going to live. Then the shattered ceiling of the building caved in on them.

"What was that?" Jubilee looked up from where Synch and Skin were tying up guards with packing tape. They'd made fairly short work of them after Jubilee was able to sneak in the back and separate the guards from the huddled hostages with a wall of her patented fireworks. Half blinded and convinced the building was about to explode, the slimeballs had found Skin and Synch waiting outside the back door ready to round them up and knock them silly.

Until she'd heard the explosion, it had seemed as though

they might pull this off. A small group of near-hysterical hostages had wandered out the back door: men, teens, a woman carrying an infant, dazed expressions on their faces. Jubilee waved them back inside. "Hide! We don't have them all yet! Stay in there." Seemingly conditioned to obey orders, the shaken people immediately complied.

"That explosion came from administration. Synch, go see what you can do. Skin, we've got to go stop those rocket launchers." He nodded, and they sprinted toward the amphitheater, knowing the only way either one of them would stop a bullet was the hard way, and that they were probably already too late.

Chamber thought the inside of the sculptor's studio was like a shrine or a church. The open-beam ceilings resembled those in a chapel; the tools and models, holy relics. He felt like a bull in a china shop, knowing that to use his powers in here would almost certainly destroy something irreplaceable.

He saw the hostages, about ten of them, huddled on pewlike benches surrounding a twenty-foot model of the Rushmore sculpture, echoing the real item visible through the big windows at the end of the room.

There were two terrorists to his left with rifles, one to his right pulling a pistol. Husk placed herself between the rifles and the hostages.

Chamber turned on the man with the pistol, ignoring the danger, the bullet he knew was waiting for him deep in the barrel, charging the man, roaring at him psychically like a demon from the grave.

Behind him, rifles discharged on single-shot mode. He heard the sounds of bullets striking stone, of breaking glass, of a woman screaming.

In front of him, the terrorist's mouth opened and his eyes went wide, skin turning white with fear at the hellish figure bearing down on him. Jono reached him just as the man fainted dead away.

He turned. A pane of the big window had been broken out. Hostages were climbing up from the floor where they had all dived when the shooting started. The other two men were unconscious on the floor. And Husk was in the process of snapping the second rifle in half over her leg.

"Hey," he complained, "we could have used those."

"Not me," she said, and threw the broken halves of the gun to the floor.

He looked at a man who seemed to be the least shaken of the hostages. "Find something to tie these blighters up." The man nodded, unable to take his eyes off the gaping energy-filled chamber that was his chest. "Go," he said, and the man was finally prodded into motion.

Then they heard the explosion. A piece of broken glass dropped from the frame of the shattered window.

"The rockets," said Husk, looking out at the big sculpture. "We've got to stop them."

Skin and Jubilee spotted the first rocket launcher near the entrance to the amphitheater. It was a boxlike affair, about six feet long and a foot across, mounted on a heavy metal tripod. In the back Jubilee could see four round openings and, in them, the tail ends of four rockets. The operator squatted a few yards away, working on a control box connected to the launcher by a thick cable.

Jubilee ran for the operator. He had a rifle, but it sat on the ground at his feet, and he hadn't spotted them coming yet. That gave her an opening.

Normally she would have used her powers, but she was afraid of setting off the rockets accidentally. She jumped into the air, landing a flying kick on the man's chin just as Wolverine had taught her. He rolled backward, away from the box.

Then she saw the second man, a spotting scope in his hand, who had been hidden behind a tree. He ran for the control box, just as she saw Skin dive for the rocket launcher, the skin on his hands stretching out.

The man slammed his fingers down on a pair of red buttons.

There was a loud *whoosh* and smoke enveloped her. She felt the heat of the exhaust, smelled the acrid odor of rocket propellant. She spotted the second man through the smoke, and exploded a firework right in front of his face, sending him reeling backward to fall silently on the ground.

She turned to see Angelo wrapped around the rocket launcher, which he had managed to pull off to one side. She could see the rocket arcing harmlessly off into the empty hills.

Then, from somewhere behind the amphitheater stage, another rocket fired, and she could see it heading straight toward the sculpture on the mountain.

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Synch swooped down on the administration building, or what was left of it. The roof at one end of the building had completely collapsed, doors and windows blasted out from the inside. There was plenty of smoke but fortunately, no fire so far.

As he touched down next to the building and stepped through a blasted window, he spotted a badly injured man lying facedown on his huge rifle. Synch noticed that the rocket launcher was still smoking, and surmised the source of the explosion. He touched the man's neck and found a regular, if weak, pulse.

"You're luckier than you deserve," he said, then stood and started looking for other survivors. "Banshee!" he called. "M!"

He heard something from under the mass of wreckage, where a big ceiling beam seemed to have split and dropped into the middle of the room. *Could someone be buried down there?*

He might not have Recall's mutant power, but Synch's natural ability did make him, in a sense, an organic mutant detector. He only had to concentrate for a moment to realize that they were both under the debris. Tapping M's strength, he started throwing wreckage aside, trying not to bring any more of the structure down.

Then, the center of the split beam began to rise. M stood from under the debris, a crushed filing cabinet held over her head, pushing aside wreckage like a vertical bulldozer. The stomach of her uniform had been shredded, which for fabric made of unstable molecules was a pretty good trick.

Banshee lay at her feet, covered with plaster dust, sitting up weakly. He coughed and waved at Synch.

"Could you take this, please?" asked Monet. "I've got a stomachache."

Husk and Chamber ran down the aisle of the amphitheater. They could see the rocket launcher at the far end, mounted on a stage riser. A man saw them coming, and dived for the control box on the floor nearby. Beyond the rocket launcher, Chamber could see the face of George Washington, looking

unflinchingly over the barrel of doom, unwilling to lower his eyes even in his last moments.

Chamber was close enough for a psionic blast. The control box exploded in a cloud of reddish plasma, ensuring that no more rockets could be fired. But the first one was already on its way, headed for Washington's face, symbol of liberty, doomed to look just like Chamber himself.

Rage boiled up inside him, expressed in a scream of psychokinetic force. A beam of energy as pure, as fast, and as straight as he had ever produced, lanced out like a laser, catching the rocket in its flight.

The explosion swallowed the great face, obliterated it in a boiling mass of fire and smoke, and Jono thought he had been too late. Then the smoke cleared, clouds parting, and Washington gazed unflinching and undamaged, toward the horizon.

Banshee, still shaken, had his arms draped over M and Synch's shoulders for support, as he limped toward the parking area. Somewhere, he could hear a car motor racing, and he wondered idly if some of the terrorists were trying to escape. Well, let the police at the roadblock catch them.

He kept his eyes down, trying to watch what his still-numb legs were doing, and probably M and Synch were doing the same. Thus, they didn't see the terrorist leader until he was standing right in front of them, Genoshan assault combine aimed squarely at them.

Synch groaned. They were none of them in shape to handle this.

The man stood at an odd angle, probably injured when he'd jumped from the window escaping M earlier. His ill-fitting clothes, doubtless intended to make him look like a typical American tourist, were dirty and torn. A trickle of blood escaped the corner of the terrorist's mouth, but he smiled a gap-toothed smile as he said, "Do not make me use this, please. I would not hesitate to do so."

"No doubt," said Banshee, wearily. He heard the car motor again, louder now.

The terrorist turned, just in time to see the little white sports car shoot up the sidewalk, brakes locked, drifting into a four-wheel spin. The hood struck him sideways, cut his feet out

from under him, sent him spinning through the air to lie on the grass in a moaning heap.

Emma climbed up to sit on the back of the driver's seat and grinned at him. "Did any of you," she asked, "seriously think I was going to sit out the party?"

Monet sat Jono down safely next to the Xabago. Emma had driven Sean out, using her psychic abilities to make the police ignore them, while Everett and Monet had relayed the rest of the team out of the park. Jono and Angelo had been the last.

Paige was sitting on a stump, still in stony form. Jono walked over. "We were a pretty good team, you and I."

She glanced up and smiled at him. "Yeah, we usually are."

"We should talk."

Her marble smile turned nervous and twitchy. "Yeah, we really should."

Just then, he heard a car approaching rapidly. He tensed until he saw the familiar pink Cadillac shoot around the back of the Xabago and grind to a halt in the gravel. Recall jumped over the door and ran toward them even as the car stopped. He trotted up. "Paige! I thought I'd never find you. We hit the roadblock, and I didn't know what to think."

She stood. "I'll tell you all about it."

Jono gazed at her questioningly.

She looked embarrassed. "We'd made plans for Recall to meet us here. I'd asked him." She looked down at her feet. "We had kind of a date."

Jono said nothing, turning to walk away into the woods.

She called his name, but he never looked back.

CHAPTER TWELVE



“Later this hour, a live report from Mt. Rushmore National Memorial, where state and federal investigators, as well as units of the National Guard, are mopping up in the wake of a startling terrorist takeover of the visitor’s center, and threats to destroy the sculpture. While the World Federalist terrorist organization claimed responsibility for the attack and it is confirmed that members of World Federalists are in custody, WNN has also learned that there were reports of multiple super-powered individuals on the scene during the attack. Some officials are now speculating that the World Federalists may have allied themselves with mutant terrorists, and may have indeed been seeking to create a ‘mutant homeland’ in Florida. We’ll have more on this right after this break.”

—excerpt from WNN news report

Nobody, not even Sean and Emma, had realized just how bad a flap Rushmore had caused until Angelo had spotted the flight of military helicopters coming in. He'd gotten to thirty before he stopped counting: gunships, troop carriers, scouts, the whole deal. Later, on the road, he'd laughingly referred to it as "Black Hills Storm," and suggested that the President needed a boost in the polls, so he'd decided to invade South Dakota. Nobody laughed.

Angelo's mood had continued to sour as they traveled the backroads north and east, and he'd watched the scenic Black Hills fade into something as flat as the kitchen floor, and half as interesting. It had taken nearly a day of driving into nowhere to reach what Angelo reckoned must be the middle. There, Emma announced that they were going to stop and lie low for a few days.

Their destination had been the Hilltop Motor Court, a single-story strip motel that looked as though it had been built to attract Model A Fords. If there was a hill, Angelo would have needed a carpenter's level to find it, and he wondered if the owners had simply bought a used sign somewhere. The manager had been delighted when Emma rented every room in the place for the next week, cash in advance, both to assure their privacy and to buy his silence.

The NO VACANCY sign had gone on, and stayed on, and the kids had each been given his or her own room. "It will be good for us all to spread out, get some space," Emma had announced, but Angelo noticed that she still stayed in the relative luxury of her RV. He suspected that she simply wanted the girls out of her hair for a while. The M.O.N.S.T.E.R. guys had tagged along, and Emma had assigned them rooms too. She'd decided that it was too risky for any mutant to be wandering around the countryside.

So, there they were. Angelo hated the place. His air conditioner roared like a dynamo, but barely managed to keep the room below eighty at night, the TV got three ghostly channels in glorious black and white, and the local nightlife consisted of a Dairy Queen and a bar from which country-and-western music seemed to blare twenty-four hours a day. There was a pool, in the same sense that the Los Angeles River is a river. It was a scratched and faded prefab fiberglass tub just long enough to swim two strokes before hitting the far wall, and

since that was impossible to do without hitting Jubilee and her inner tube, and she never seemed to leave, he just didn't see the point.

Instead, he put on his baggies and shades, sat in a peeling metal lawn chair at the edge of the pool, and sulked. Jubilee paddled in slow circles, which was all there was room to do in the tiny pool, her motion echoing those of the turkey vultures that slowly wheeled overhead. "I wonder if they're for me," he said to nobody in particular.

There was a squeak that told him somebody had settled into the next chair over. "Ask not for whom the buzzard circles," said Chill, "he circles for me."

Surprised, Angelo turned and made eye contact with Chill, finding there a kindred spirit.

"I hate this place," they both said at once, and then broke into laughter.

"I hate the plains," Chill explained. "I hate the Midwest. I hate being away from the ocean. I'm a California boy, and I love the beach."

Angelo raised an eyebrow. "California? No kidding? I'm from California too. What part?"

"San Diego. You?"

"L.A." He felt his momentary elation fading. "One of your better neighborhoods, where we had the Chicano gangs, the Asian gangs, the black gangs, and white gangs. Your basic United Nations with Glock 17s. About a hundred and twenty miles from your hometown, but I'm betting it was on a whole 'nother planet."

"You miss home?"

"Nah. Getting out of that 'hood was the best thing I ever did."

He grinned tentatively. "Miss the beach?"

Angelo chuckled. "Yeah, I miss the beach. And some of my old buds. And the hills." He pushed himself up in the chair and looked around. "What the hell keeps the sky from just falling down and crushing this place flat?"

"Maybe," suggested Chill, "it already did."

They had a good laugh at that.

"You know, Chill, you aren't such a bad *hombre*. You said you hate the Midwest, so why you going to Chicago?"

He leaned back in the chair and sighed. "Summer job. Re-

call's family owns a cold-storage warehouse, so I'll drive a forklift all summer moving crates of fish from one corner to another. It's not so bad. Pay is okay, and part of my power is that cold doesn't bother me. I could do it in my Speedos if I wanted."

"But you hate it."

"Need the money. My family isn't rich, and the student loans are piling up. It's sometimes hard for a mutant to get a job, even when it's not that obvious. No offense," he added.

"None taken. 'Cept, with you, how would they know?"

"They figure it out, sooner or later. Maybe they don't know I'm a mutant, but they know there's something odd about me. My hands are cold all the time. I don't get goose bumps when I fetch something from the walk-in freezer, I drink my Slushie way too fast. They find some trumped-up reason to fire me. Always happens." He studied Angelo's face, seemingly looking for a reaction. "You don't know how it is, do you? Don't you ever worry about money?"

"Back in the *barrio* when I was a kid? Every day. But since this—" he gestured at the skin on his arm "—I've been at Xavier's, and Emma pretty well takes care of that."

"Must be nice." He actually sounded envious.

Angelo pointed at his face, "You try looking at this in the mirror every day, and tell me how 'nice' it is."

Chill held up his palms apologetically. Angelo could see frost forming there. "Hey, sorry," Chill said. "I guess sometimes I think about the mutants that have real powers, that things would somehow be better for them. It doesn't work that way, does it?"

"Nah, guess not. We all got our cross to bear, you know?"

They stared silently up at the wheeling buzzards for a while.

"I hate this place," said Chill.

"Me too," agreed Angelo.

One thing each room in the Hilltop Motor Court did have was a perfectly functional AM radio, and Paige had wasted no time in locating a station that carried Walt Norman. "I want to find out if he says anything about Mt. Rushmore," she'd told them, and soon all of them, M.O.N.S.T.E.R.s and Xavier students alike, had gathered in Paige's room to listen to the show. The air conditioner had failed utterly to keep up with all their body

heat, so they'd finally given up, opened all the windows, and propped open the door.

They arrayed themselves around the radio as the show started. Angelo draped himself sideways across an armchair and propped his head up with a pillow pilfered from the bed. The program started with the usual Norman monologue, the usual sappy banter with Trent McComb, the usual idiotic jokes with Mrs. Dale. It was just past the first break when he finally got around to Rushmore.

"It's a shocking thing," he said, "when such a great symbol of our liberty can be threatened by the very people who abuse that same liberty. And of course, you've all heard the stories about mutants being there. Now mind you, no mutants were captured, only World Federalists who, as far as we know, are as human as you or I. But I have to wonder how you can call somebody human when they have, in fact, sold out the human race." He laughed. *"But they paid the price for trusting mutants. Yes, sir, when things went bad their mutant buddies turned tail and left them behind. All I can say is, thank God for the United States National Guard!"*

Paige sat, legs curled up, on the bed, her back against the headboard, her eyes intense. She rocked back and forth, and she was biting her lower lip until it was white, until Angelo thought it might bleed.

"That is such crap," Angelo said. "That is such utter crap."

Norman continued. *"And this business of ceding Florida to the Cubans, and now we hear talk of a 'Mutant Homeland,' right here inside the borders of the United States of America! I tell you, it just shakes my faith in mankind to see humans, even terrorist humans, buying into such a thing. But then, then something happens to restore that faith. When we have a hero, just a regular guy with no powers, just somebody trying to make a difference, a man like Buford Hollis, aka Razorback, a man who would take a bullet for his President—"*

Angelo snickered. "I heard on the news that he took a bullet in that pig's head he wears, that's where he took a bullet."

Norman went on. *"—that is when my faith is restored. I just can't say enough good about this man."*

Angelo made a raspberry noise. "Hurray for Pigback."

"Razorback," corrected Everett.

"Whatever."

Recall, who was sitting on the foot of the bed, shook his head. "This guy is a mutant, right? He has a power, right? I don't get it. I mean, he saved the President and all, and that's good, maybe even heroic. But he's a mutant, and he isn't telling anyone. The whole world is watching him, and he's shut up tight as a clam. How brave is that?"

"Oh, yeah," said Angelo, "like he wants Norman saying he tried to steal flipping Florida too? If I was him, I wouldn't say anything either."

Chill looked at him. "I think you would, Angelo. You're a straight-up guy. You say what's on your mind, and you don't care what they think about it. This Razorback guy has a chance to say something and he's not, and that's totally bogus."

Angelo thought about it. What would he do if he were in Razorback's size fifteens? How did he know? "Maybe we should cut old Pigback some slack. Like I said, we all got our crosses to bear. How do we know what his is?"

Jubilee rolled over on the floor and snickered. "Stupid headgear."

Paige shushed them. She was still listening to Norman.

"We've had these reports of mutants at Devils Tower, a national monument, and for all we know they were behind the attempt on the President's life, and now they want to trade Mt. Rushmore for a mutant homeland. I say, where will it end? I say we give them a homeland, all right—round them up, put them where we can keep an eye on them, keep them out of mischief. What do you think? We'll be going to the phones in just a few minutes to find out."

Paige looked around. "Where's the cell phone? I'm calling."

Angelo groaned. Paige was just making herself crazy. "Give it a rest, why don't you? I mean, what's the point?"

She looked at Jubilee. "Somebody's got to set the record straight, especially about Rushmore. Where's the phone?"

Jubilee reached into the pocket of her coat, took out the little phone, and flipped it open. "I'm going to call," she said.

"No, yer not!" Sean stood in the open door, hands on hips, his face a mask of anger. He marched purposefully into the room, stepping over Jubilee and snapping off the radio. "You should not be listening to such rubbish as this, much less

thinkin' about calling this—this—vulture." He stared at Paige, who slowly folded the phone and put it down, a beaten look on her face. "Paige, you of all people should know better than this."

"He was talking about us, Sean. Telling lies."

He seemed moved by the statement. "Aye, lies. Just words, lass, and I'll wager not the last lie you'll ever hear said about ye. It's part of being a mutant." He marched out of the room, pausing in the doorway. "I'm sorry, lass—" he looked around the room "—all of ye. It's not fair, but that's just the way it is, and there's not a thing we can do about it."

Then he was gone, and he had left the room as silent as the radio.

Jubilee sat in the inner tube, the rubber warm in the summer sun, the water cool underneath her. She splashed some on her chest and neck to keep off the heat and watched butterflies flitting across the parking lot.

The motel manager, a shriveled little man named George, fished dead katydids out of the pool with a net on a long metal pole. He looked at her and scratched the gray whiskers on his unshaved chin. "You kids mutants or something?"

Jubilee didn't know what to say. Finally she nodded.

"That's all right," he said. "Used to be a mutant myself."

She just stared at him.

"Got better," he finally said.

Sitting on a couple of old chairs by the pool, she could see Chill and Angelo, staring silently up at the buzzards wheeling overhead.

"I hate this place," said Chill.

"I hate this place," agreed Angelo.

Chill watched as one of the buzzards peeled off from the group and glided away. "I have an idea," he said suddenly. He leaned over and whispered in Angelo's ear.

Slowly a broad smile spread over Angelo's face. "Jubilee, get out of that tube, girl, and gather up the posse at the Xabago. We're going for a drive."

"A drive?" Jubilee was confused. "To where?"

Chill grinned at her. "To nowhere. They've got a lot of it around here."

Curious enough not to question, she climbed out of the pool,

put on her yellow coat over her swimsuit, and started looking for the others. It took about fifteen minutes for her to find Paige and Dog Pound out behind the hotel, where he appeared to be demonstrating his ability to communicate telepathically with a notch-eared tomcat. By the time they got to the Xabago, everyone else seemed to be there except Angelo. Jono closed the door after her, jumped into the driver's seat, and they were soon roaring off down the highway, turning onto the first farm road they came to, a narrow, empty stretch of blacktop heading arrow straight toward the horizon.

She looked around, checking the bathroom and the bedroom. "Where's Angelo?"

Chill slipped past her so he could climb into the top-gun seat. "On the roof," he answered. He reached up and pounded on the bubble with his fist. "Coast is clear," he yelled out through the bubble. "Do it!"

Jubilee moved so she could look up through the dome, and saw Angelo's face, showing all his teeth in a big smile. He was wearing a tank top, cut low on the side, and he seemed to be crouched behind the dome, holding on to the roof racks with the extended skin of his hands. The rest of his skin was flapping in the breeze, on his face, and especially under his arms and down his sides.

"Jono," said Chill, "floor it."

The Xabago's motor roared, the camper surged forward down the empty road, and the skin under Angelo's arms began to balloon out in the wind. He whooped so loud, they could hear it even over the roar, and she could see his fingers stretching under the strain. Suddenly they were all jammed around her, cheering and clapping and trying to see up through the dome, as Angelo rose up from the roof, flying over the Xabago like a kite. And for just a minute, they all flew with him.

The Expatriate watched as the express courier left his office, and considered the package on his desk. The phone rang and he answered it. "Ivan, your timing is perfect."

"I am afraid," said Ivan, "that we will be receiving few orders from the World Federalists, at least for the next few lifetimes."

The Expatriate chuckled. "That's a shame, but there are

other causes, other customers. The cycle never ends, my friend."

"Did the documentation I sent arrive?"

He reached over and picked up the thick envelope. He pulled the strip to open it, and removed a book wrapped in tissue paper. "Indeed, it just showed up."

He removed the tissue paper and studied the drab, government-issue cover. It read, S.H.I.E.L.D. MANDROID MK IV-B. COVERT OPERATIONS MODEL. TOP SECRET. He thumbed open the cover, studied the drawing of the dangerous-looking powered combat armor inside. "Thank you, Ivan. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some reading to do if I'm going to be ready for our guests."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



“It was announced today that Buford Hollis, the super hero known as Razorback, will be made an honorary member of the Secret Service next week in a ceremony immediately before a White House reception in his honor. Hollis, who is traveling to promote a widow’s fund for the nation’s truckers killed in the line of duty, could not be reached for comment.”

—excerpt from WNN news report

RAZORBACK HIDES EVIDENCE OF TRUCK STOP FOR UFOS

DUCKBOY SEEN DRIVING CLEVELAND TAXICAB

MUTANT BABY EATS POODLE WHILE PARENTS SLEEP

—*National Explainer* headlines

It was at a Denny's somewhere outside Pierre, South Dakota that Jubilee found a tourist flyer for the Mall of America. It was approximately five minutes later when the begging, whining, and nagging started. Sean Cassidy heard about the four levels, the four hundred stores, the restaurants, the nightclubs, the amusement park, the aquarium, and the miniature golf course. He heard every word of the flyer, in exact detail and also paraphrased, rearranged in every permutation possible, and he was certain that he'd heard them all by the time they reached Blunt, twenty-two miles later. Sean's ears could withstand the roar of jet engines, the pounding of artillery, or the blast of a rock concert, but they had no immunity against the cajoling of a determined teenager.

Finally he consulted with Emma when they stopped for lunch at a somewhat more upscale eatery of Emma's choice. "It's near Minneapolis, not really out of our way. What do ye think?"

She took a bite of her chocolate mousse and pushed it aside. "Shopping?" She smiled. "Really, Sean, my arm could be twisted. I mean, it's not Rodeo Drive, but it could be entertaining." She studied his face. "You're surprised."

"Aye."

She laughed, and it was an almost musical thing. "You don't know much about women, do you? Besides, after the events of our last few stops it will make a nice change. After all, what kind of trouble can the children get into at a mall?"

It was Sean's turn to laugh. "And ye don't know much about kids, do ye?"

The news received a mixed reception in the Xabago, and Angelo had to be the least enthused of the bunch. Jubilee was thrilled, of course. Everett and Paige seemed excited about the prospect. For once, Angelo observed, it was someplace Everett hadn't already been before. Monet seemed only a little appalled, and Jono was just disinterested. But Angelo hated malls. Back in L.A., malls had been where the rich kids hung out, where kids like him weren't welcome, where people looked and talked in whispers, and security guards watched with suspicious eyes.

He tried to explain that to Jubilee, but she wasn't having any of it. "Come on, Angelo. Chill out. This isn't the Galleria,

this is the Mall of America, where everybody comes to shop. All nations, all races, all colors, all genetic makeups. It's, like, the ultimate democracy. If you've got a wallet, you can play, and if you don't you can still shop the windows with the best of them."

But Angelo wasn't buying it. He'd learned young that you were always careful to know whose turf you were walking on, and to respect the lines if you didn't intend to trample them and back it up. Some lines were worth trampling, and some, some you just shied away.

Things got more annoying as they reached the mall and Paige started oohing and aahing at the size of the parking lot. "I have never seen that many cars. I didn't know there were that many cars in the world."

"At least," quipped Angelo, "the Xabago is easy to spot."

They found an RV parking spot and Jubilee was, of course, the first one out the door, Paige in tow. He could see Jono watching her silently from the driver's seat.

The M.O.N.S.T.E.R.s had gone over to nearby Minneapolis rather than tagging along, something about Pound "wanting to see where Mary Tyler Moore lived," so at least Angelo didn't have to watch Jono pining over that business. He studied Jono and frowned. Jono was doing okay in the glum department, even without Recall's help.

Angelo sat on the couch looking at the closed door. He could hear Emma outside, telling everyone to meet back at the RVs after closing time. He heaved a sigh.

Jono wandered back and held out something for him. "You want the image inducer?"

Angelo shook his head. "I was thinking about staying here. Maybe go over to the other RV and see if I can get the satellite dish to work."

Jono shrugged. "We could be missing out."

"We?"

Jono shuffled his feet. "Not much interest in it, myself."

"Really think we might be missing something?"

"Dunno."

"I'll go if you go."

Angelo shrugged. "What's to lose?"

Jono held up the image inducer. "You want this?"

Angelo took it, studied it for a minute, then tossed it on the couch. "Nah. Let 'em stare. I'm used to it. Come on, *amigo*."

• • •

Jubilee looked around the shop in mock horror. "A bookstore? Paige, girl, I give up. You are, like, totally hopeless."

Paige stopped to examine a rack near the front of the store marked NEW ARRIVALS. "It wouldn't hurt you to read a book once in a while, Jubes."

"I do read a book—once in a while." She rolled her eyes. "It's just that, well, I'd rather experience things firsthand, instead of just reading them in a book. Is that a crime?"

"Yeah, well, if you read a few books, maybe it would help you to understand what it is you're experiencing." She waved her arms. "Look at this place. It has the wisdom of the world in it!"

Jubilee was looking at a clearance table. She picked up a thick hardback and held it up for Paige to see. The cover illustration was of a balding man of maybe forty, round faced and rosy cheeked. His wide mouth turned up in a tight-lipped smile that looked vaguely disturbing, as if he knew something embarrassing about you and was going to tell all your friends. He wore a dark suit and sat carefully posed at a desk. Next to him was a large model of a DNA double helix with a paper dunce cap perched on top. The title was *Selfish Genes*. The author was Walt Norman.

"Oh," said Paige, "no."

Paige stepped closer. There was a big red sticker over Norman's head that read CLEARANCE PRICE: \$4.95. "Oh," she repeated, "no."

Jubilee smiled weakly. "At least he's on the closeout rack. Strictly last season's fashions."

"Maybe," said Paige, running her fingertips over the cover as though she might learn something from the texture alone, "but it doesn't necessarily work that way. Maybe there's just a paperback coming out, or another book. Maybe this was a best-seller and we just didn't hear about it."

"It's true," said Jubilee, "we don't get out much." Her voice dropped to a hiss, "Which is why I don't want to spend my entire trip to the Mall of America looking at this moron's book!"

Paige flipped it open to the table of contents. "'Ten Stupid Things Mutants Do to Hurt Their Own Cause.' 'We've Replaced Your Department with Some Fast Guy: Unfair Mutant

Competition in the Workplace.' 'The Equality Myth: All Men are Created Equal, but the Constitution Doesn't Say Anything About Mutants.' 'You're Ugly and Your Mother Dresses You Funny: Why Mutants Hide Behind Costumes and Masks.' 'Zero Mutant Population Growth: Stopping the Mutant Plague.' " She snapped the book closed angrily, pushed it away, then pulled it back. "I should read this."

"Then buy it."

"I can't. It's the money."

Jubilee looked exasperated. "Emma gave us an allowance. You can't have spent yours. We haven't been anywhere. I haven't spent mine, and goodness knows it ain't for lack of wanting." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a five. "Here, I'll give you the money."

She shook her head. "No, you don't get it. See, if I buy the book, Norman might get some money, and I just can't stand the idea of sending him my money. Any of it. Five dollars or five cents."

Angelo and Jono leaned on the railing, looking down at the amusement park four floors below. Angelo refused to let on, but he was kind of getting a kick out of the place. Not the stores, or the tourist traps, but just watching the people.

If being a mutant had given him any kind of inferiority complex, watching people was good therapy. He looked back at the theater and saw a woman shaped like a fireplug staring at him as she walked by. He just smiled sweetly at her and batted his eyes. She looked aghast, quickly wheeled, and walked away.

Angelo turned back to the railing and looked out at the mall, laughing. "The little people. They don't know they're ugly. That's funny."

Jono looked down at the park. "They look like ants."

"Maybe they are ants." He leaned way over the railing. "I wonder if I could spit and hit that guy on the head?"

He laughed. "Angelo, don't!"

"You don't think I'll do it?"

"Don't!"

He leaned over, made a sound in his throat. "I'm telling you, I'll do it!"

"No, I mean it's not fair." He pointed at his face, or lack of one.

Angelo leaned back and laughed. "Sorry, m'man." As he leaned back, he spotted a security guard giving them an icy stare. He took Jono by the arm. "Come on, man, let's ride. Some things, they never change."

As they sat down at the restaurant, Sean noticed the small jewelry store bag Emma was carrying. "Get me a gift, did you?"

Emma raised an eyebrow and looked at him with mock indignation. "Sean Cassidy, here in America we have for some time had this thing called the twentieth century, and in it, it is perfectly acceptable for a woman to buy herself a diamond if she so desires."

"So something is bothering you."

She frowned. "And how would you know?"

"Every time since I've known you that you've bought yourself jewelry, something was eating at you."

She stared at him for a while, then nodded. "I'll never get over these tricks that nontelepaths use to get inside each other's heads. I'm trying, but frankly I don't know if I'll ever get the hang of it."

"I was a policeman for a long time. It's a skill you learn. Aye, I've known some people who have a gift for it, but I've sometimes suspected that some of them were closet telepaths." He looked at the bag. "May I?"

She slid it over to him. He removed the long black velvet covered box and opened it. A silver bracelet ringed with small diamonds lay inside. "Very nice. Tasteful and understated, yet elegant." He closed the box and returned it to her.

"What you're saying is, it shows restraint. I'm trying, Sean, I really am, in many ways."

"You're worried about the kids?"

A slight smile crept back onto her face. "You're reading my mind again."

"You've been dancing around the thing since we sat down, talking about reading minds, and restraint in when to do it."

"This was supposed to be a vacation for them, and so far we've run into nothing but trouble, especially the terrorists at Seattle and Rushmore. It's hard to see how they can't be con-

nected, and yet hard to see how they can be. And the children, they've been so withdrawn, riding in the boys' rattletrap all the time. Perhaps the whole thing was a bad idea. We wanted to put them in touch with the outside world, but maybe we've shown them more of that world than they're ready to see."

Sean considered mentioning that he'd discovered the kids listening to Walt Norman, but decided it would only put more ideas into her head. "They're not children, Emma, almost adults some of them. These are dark days for mutants, but we can't protect them forever. Perhaps that's all the more reason to give them a taste of what's out there, and give them a chance to handle it themselves. All in all, I'd say they've given a pretty good accounting of themselves."

A waiter came by and put leather-bound menus down in front of them. Sean flipped his open, but didn't really look at it. "As for the terrorists, that bothers me, too, but try as I might, I can't see the link between them and us. They've also struck elsewhere where we weren't involved. Perhaps it's no more than a coincidence."

"I wish I could believe that, Sean. I really wish I could."

And much as he wanted to believe it, too, his suspicious nature told him that she was right. "I think we should be keepin' a much closer watch on the kids from here on out."

Jubilee sat on a bench watching the rivers of people flow by, an endless parade of bad hair, worse fashion sense, and people for whom life had no more meaning than a mass-produced ceramic angel. And the really, really horrible thing was, she envied them their simple lives, their simple pleasures, their blissful blindness. Once upon a time she'd been blissfully blind, too, rollerblading around the local mall, security guards in hot pursuit, no concerns other than the immediate thrill and where the next one would come from.

She'd seen this old movie once—most every mutant saw this one—about a guy who gave himself X-ray vision. His powers kept growing and growing, tearing his life apart, even as he saw more and more, until finally he saw too much, and what he'd seen was too terrible to behold. Unable to stand it, he'd clawed his own eyes out.

She shuddered as she thought about it, yet that cheesy old movie held a terrible fascination for mutants. And now, she

thought she finally understood why. It wasn't about powers or vision in the literal sense, but about understanding. Mutants couldn't ignore the reality of the world, like the blissful masses. It reached out and slapped them in the face. Regularly. That was what Norman mistook for an agenda. It was just that day-to-day struggle to deal with a reality that others didn't see.

Paige came over with a cotton candy in her hand. She offered a bite to her, but Jubilee pushed it away. Paige examined the small stash of shopping bags tucked under Jubilee's feet. "You're not buying much. Do you have a stash in a locker somewhere?"

Jubilee shook her head.

Paige leaned closer, put a hand on her shoulder. "What's wrong, girlfriend?"

She shrugged. "I just guess I'm just like, not a mall rat anymore. It's kinda stupid, but it feels like I've lost something."

Paige smiled sympathetically. "'You can't go home again.'"

Jubilee chuckled. "Don't tell me. You read that in a book somewhere, right?"

Paige laughed. "It's called growin' up, girl, and don't let anybody fool you. You lose a lot when you grow up. But you gain a lot too." She reached over and gave Jubilee a friendly hug.

Jubilee hugged her back. "Thanks, Paige. Sometimes, you're all right."

"Group hug," Everett announced as he popped from behind them, a small shopping bag in hand. "Can anybody join?"

He plopped down on the bench and pulled a clear plastic box from the bag. "Look at this! Limited edition replica of a '65 Karmann-Ghia. Convertible."

She and Paige looked at each other and giggled.

Everett looked up from his toy, puzzled. "What?"

"Boys, on the other hand," said Jubilee, "avoid the problems of growing up completely."

The Expatriate was careful to keep his smile internal. For once, he was glad to have Norman in his booth on one of his rampages. Of late, the show's nominal star had become more of a problem. Convinced that the rocketing ratings were his do-

ing, he was throwing his weight around like the Juggernaut. He'd taken to making unreasonable and unnecessary demands, not only of "McComb" but of the rest of the staff as well, often distracting them from tasks that the Expatriate had assigned them. He had been drunk with power, and only the latest ratings reports had brought him back to Earth.

Norman burst through his door and tossed the ratings report on his console. "Look at this!" When he didn't immediately pick it up, Norman lifted papers and shook them in his face. "Look at this!"

"I've seen it already. I've been here since six A.M. reviewing those archived sketches, as you requested."

"Then what are you going to do about it?"

The Expatriate looked up calmly, savoring the moment. Sweat was running down Norman's bald forehead, and this time it was because of fear, not anger. The numbers had gone flat and now were on the decline, some shows even rating lower than the show had been doing before "Peg" started to call. "Well, Walt, you're the ratings man, you've said so yourself often enough the last week or two. All I can promise is that I, personally, will be a loyal and faithful listener, just in case the ratings people call on me."

Norman's body was rigid, almost vibrating, his face reddening. "Trent, you've got to do something. We're headed for the basement. The executives aren't even returning my calls this week. I've tried to tell them it's a temporary dip, a statistical fluke, but they won't listen."

He smiled just a little. "Because, Walt, they know, as I do, that that's a lie. The show's in trouble, and it needs a shot in the arm to survive."

Norman's eyes were wide, desperate. "What can we do? That girl hasn't called in almost a week. I don't even know who she is, or how to find her."

I do, thought the Expatriate, enjoying the moment. "There's really not much I can do, Walt. To tell you the truth, just getting the girl to call back won't be enough. The novelty of that has worn off. What we need now is an event, something that will have all America talking about us today, and the next day, and the day after that."

"But what?"

I know just the thing—but he couldn't tell Norman about

that. He'd just have to find it out the hard way.

"I can't do anything, Walt, but I can tell you what to do. How'd you like to be the one who turns this show around, for good?"

It was still midafternoon when Paige, along with Jubilee and Everett, returned to the Xabago. Paige had decided to try to catch the Norman show on the radio, and to her surprise, the others had decided to tag along.

They arrived to find Monet sitting on the bed, surrounded by a clutter of neatly handwritten pages, and turning out more at a furious pace.

Paige stood in the bedroom doorway, trying to figure out what was up. She picked up one of the pages by the corner and looked at it suspiciously. The words looked familiar. "Monet, what is this?"

"I'm making you a copy of Walt Norman's book."

"What? A copy of the book how, copying from what?"

Monet looked up with that patented *is there something unusual about this?* expression of hers. "Jubilee told me you wanted to read the book and didn't want to buy it, so I'm making you a copy."

In her exasperation, Paige was almost shouting, "A copy of what?"

Monet just stared at her like a cat. "I memorized it." She went back to her neat scribbling.

Behind her, Jubilee giggled. "She was bored. It gave her something to do."

Paige, finally seeing that she'd been had, broke into laughter.

"Hey," said Everett from the front of the Xabago, "I've got the show. It's already on. He's ragging on Rushmore again."

Paige groaned and marched to the front of the RV. She sat down on the recliner, and found herself unconsciously scanning to see where they'd left the cell phone. It was on the arm of the couch, and she stood up just long enough to reach over and grab it.

Norman was in the middle of one of his rants. "*—ow the mutant spits in the face of liberty, tries to desecrate the very symbols of liberty, and how the mutant aligns himself with the*

enemies of our country. Whereas, the indomitable human spirit, as personified in the heroic Razorback, throws himself against those same forces with every resource at his disposal. He has no fancy powers, no superhuman tricks, just his courage, his determination, his native intelligence, his willingness to fight for what is right."

Paige started dialing the phone. "This is too much." The operator recognized her voice, and told her she was being put right on the air.

"I see here on my screen that we have Peg, the mutant girl who has been calling us of late on the phone. I'm really glad, because maybe she can try to explain the shameful behavior of those mutant terrorists at Rushmore. Thanks for calling, Peg. Can you explain this to me?"

"I can't explain it, because it didn't happen. There were terrorists at Mt. Rushmore, human terrorists. There just also happened to be some mutants there, and they helped. They were the ones who captured the terrorists and freed the hostages."

"Well, that's not the way we hear it, Peg. We had an eyewitness yesterday telling us how the hostages had been brutalized and terrified by mutants."

"Eyewitnesses are wrong sometimes. Just because somebody says something doesn't mean it's the truth. That's not what happened."

"And just because you tell me, I'm supposed to believe it? Now, I'm not saying I think you're a liar, because I don't. You've always told us the version of truth that you believe, distorted though I think it is, but that's honesty of a sort. But how would you know, Peg? We talked to one of the actual hostages. Are you calling her a liar? Because she was there—and how would you know?"

"Because I was there too!"

There was a stunned silence from the radio. Finally: "Peg, are you telling me that you're involved with these mutant terrorists, an obviously well intended young lady such as yourself?"

"They—we aren't terrorists. We're just regular people on vacation who stumbled into something."

"Regular people who fly and shoot death rays and scramble

people's minds, Peg. Dangerous people walking among unsuspecting tourists . . ."

"Why can't you give us the benefit of the doubt? You don't assume this Razorback has some ulterior motive. You don't assume he's evil. Why? Why?" She was on the verge of tears, some still calm part of her brain realizing that things were spinning totally out of her control.

"Because he's one of us, Peg. He doesn't pose a threat to us because he is one of us. Can't you see that?"

She laughed bitterly. "That just shows you how much you know. I'll tell you something about your hero Razorback, something you don't know. He—" The word hung in her throat, and she realized the horrible thing she was on the brink of doing. The access they had to Xavier's files, as students of the school, was a precious trust. That had been instilled in them from the beginning. The information in those files could do immeasurable harm, aid enemies, destroy lives. To violate that trust would make her the most horrible kind of traitor. "He's a poser," she finished lamely. "He's a real poser."

She turned off the phone and let it fall to her lap, even as tears began to stream down her cheeks. Jubilee and Everett were at her side, trying to comfort her, but she barely even saw them. *How had things gotten this bad?*

And then, from the radio, she heard Norman. "*Peg? Are you there, Peg? I think we lost her, but I hope she's still listening out there. Peg, I know sometimes it's hard to make yourself understood on the telephone. That's why I'm extending an invitation to you, personally. I want you to come into our Chicago studios and be our guest for an entire show. The whole country will be listening, Peg, and you'll have your chance to set things straight.*"

Paige looked up, not believing the words, grabbing at them the way a drowning person grabs at a life ring. She had to make things right, and this was indeed the only chance she'd have.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



“This Friday, don’t miss ‘Peg,’ the mutant mystery girl, live and in person in our studios. It’s Walt Norman versus the mutant menace, up close, personal, and nasty, just the way you like it. When everybody is talking about it on Monday, don’t be the only human in America that missed it.”

—promo spot for *The Walt Norman Show*

As the Xtravagant rolled into a truck stop outside Madison, Wisconsin, Paige sat with Jubilee and Monet in the rear bedroom finishing a phone call. She managed to wrap things up and shut down the phone just as there was a tapping at the door.

"Girls, are you okay back there?" It was Emma's voice.

"Sure," said Jubilee, "we're—" She stopped with her mouth hanging open, eyes searching desperately from side to side.

"We're trying on clothes," added Paige hastily.

"Oh," Emma said. "Well, I'm going to stretch my legs while they fill us up and see if they have anything resembling a cup of coffee here."

They heard her walking away, and the outside door open and close. Even with the windows closed, the air started to smell slightly of oil and spilled gas. Jubilee glared at Paige. "Well that was a great story. Trying on clothes? How third grade can you get?"

Paige shrugged. "She bought it, didn't she?"

"Ms. Frost," said Jubilee, "doesn't buy anything without looking at it closely first. Anyway, that was too close. I told you we shouldn't call from here."

Paige looked at the phone dejectedly. "Where was I going to call from, what with Sean over in the Xabago all the time? Our RV is bigger. It has more places to hide."

Jubilee looked skeptical. "Oh, yeah, and if Emma so much as touches one of us with her telepathy, we're cooked. She's probably suspicious as it is. This is never going to work, especially with them suddenly giving us this lame baby-sitter routine."

Paige looked grim. "It's got to work. It's all set. I'm going on *The Walt Norman Show* day after tomorrow. I'll wear a ski mask so they won't see my face. They've promised that they'd respect my privacy and let me leave without being molested or followed."

Monet assumed a lotus position, then slowly floated up a few inches above the bed. "And you believe this from Norman?"

"I didn't talk to Norman. I talked to his producer, Trent McComb."

Jubilee peered out through the curtain looking for Emma.

A smiling pump boy looked back at her, and she jerked the curtain shut. "This place is full of Peeping Toms." She sat back on the bed. "Well, that's great. Norman has somebody to delegate his lying to. Listen to me, Paige, they're up to something. You need backup."

"Of course he's up to something, which is exactly why I have to go alone. I got myself into this mess, and I have to straighten it out. If something goes wrong, I don't want any of the rest of you to get into trouble." She tossed the cell phone to Monet. "Listen, I'm going to go find a Moon Pie or something. See you guys in a bit."

Jubilee watched closely as she left the room, then met Monet's eyes. They didn't agree on a lot of things, but she suspected this time that they were on exactly the same wavelength. Monet said, "We can't let Paige walk into the Norman den without an escort."

"Absolutely," agreed Jubilee. "We're a team, and we're going in together, whether she likes it or not." She bounced nervously on the edge of the bed, then looked out through the curtains again. "Thing is, how do we convince Paige of that?"

"There's a more significant problem. While we might possibly cover for Paige while she's gone, all of us leaving at once isn't going to go unnoticed."

Jubilee nodded. "And our goose is like, cooked, good. But it won't be cooked until after we get back, and if that's the way it's got to be, then that's the way it's got to be."

Ivan paced the warehouse nervously, his shoes scuffing on the worn plywood flooring. The place had been a dog-food factory until recently when the company had been bought up, in typical American fashion, by a conglomerate that wanted only to shut it down and end competition.

Now the workers were gone and the machines stood just the way they'd been when the last person had flipped the switch on the way out the door. The hoppers were still filled with ingredients, conveyers with unbaked dog biscuits in the shape of cartoon bones. Rats scuttled in every dark corner, fat and happy from the bounty left behind for them, and the building smelled like the inside of a dog-food bag.

It was an industrial corpse, victim of neglect by a decadent society that did not deserve the men and women who had once

toiled here. Ivan hated the place, but it was only a staging area, rented through an untraceable chain of dummy corporations from landlords so eager to be relieved of it that they asked no questions once the cashier's check cleared.

In a few days they would be gone, the dummy corporations would cease to even pretend to exist, and the Expatriate would sit on top of a powerful media empire that would be completely in his control.

Ivan heard the combination lock on a nearby door click, and squinted as it opened, allowing a flood of sunlight into the dim space. A man stepped in, the profile of his hawklike nose visible, his blue eyes glittering in the shadows. The man walked across the warehouse, muscular, graceful, confident, alert to every sound and movement, his once-military-cropped blond hair now grown long, slicked tightly back and tied in a short ponytail.

Ivan smiled and held out his hand. "Expatriate!"

The man took his hand eagerly, then pulled him into a bear hug, slapping him on the back. He released him and stepped back. "Ivan, it's been too long."

"I understand too well the sacrifices of going deep undercover, my friend. Perhaps when our plan is complete, you won't have to be so secretive."

He nodded. "Indeed. After Friday's program, we'll be back on top of the ratings, and the network executives will answer to me, and not the other way around. And Norman, poor Norman, will cease to be a problem. I'll replace the staff members not already in on our operation, and the show will become a wholly owned subsidiary of Expatriate Arms." He noticed the truck parked in the corner of the warehouse, the door open and the rear stairway unfolded, and gestured in that direction. "Come, show me what I've paid so much money for."

Ivan led him into the truck, where the technicians were still busy finishing up their work. The Expatriate stood in front of the first unit in line, a somewhat human-shaped thing of sleek silver metal.

"Mandroids," said the Expatriate, as though only now accepting them as being real. The suits of powered armor had been covertly shipped out of the country by S.H.I.E.L.D. years ago to support "friendly" governments against revolutionaries. Eventually, despite this aid, the revolutionaries had won

and the units had been surplused into the international black market, where the Expatriate had returned them to their country of origin. Ivan enjoyed the irony of these metal men returning to wreak havoc on the country that had created them.

The Expatriate bent to examine the weapons' housings. The oversized forearms on this first unit were closed, marked only by a few exhaust ports and muzzle openings, but on most of the other units, the forearms were open and were the focus of the greater part of the technicians' attentions.

"The weapon systems are still being worked on," explained Ivan. "Not all units will have all weapons, except for the star of our show, of course. Still, we'll have an assortment of concussion cannons, tanglefoot antipersonnel grenades, flame-throwers, and needle repeaters, at least one functional weapon per unit. 'Peg' will have all these, plus the magnetic constrictor. It's mainly intended for use against mechanical targets, but may suit our purposes."

"Let me see our darling 'Peg.' "

For dramatic effect, Ivan had covered the next unit in line with a canvas tarp, which he now pulled aside. The thing had the same rough shape as the other units, but its metal skin was all hidden under latex rubber or false hair. The rubber face was horrific, yet the kinship to humanity was recognizable. Inky glass eyes stared out of the deep eye sockets. A simple smock provided the thing's only clothing. The exposed arms and legs were covered with dark, shaggy hair, giving it an apelike appearance. The hair extended up the neck and face. Only the top of the head was different, where a long, flowing wig of straight, silvery-gray hair had been attached.

Ivan pointed at the snout/mouth. "We've wired servo actuators into the voice box. The lips will move in time to the speech. It may not be convincing enough to fool anyone for long, but I think it will do. People tend to see what they expect to see. We've also fabricated a robe with a hood, which will further disguise the unit while it enters the building."

The Expatriate ran his hand over the latex, feeling the thin but effective armor-plate skin underneath. "Excellent. They should be more than adequate for the task. They need only delay a few mutant children, and of course," he added with a laugh, "kill a fat radio host while his audience listens in horror."

. . .

Recall sat on the bed in his room, back to the wall. He looked around at the old toys (he'd never lost one, and certainly never let his mom throw one away), the comic books, the outgrown sports equipment, the low-watt radio transmitter where he'd broadcast his first radio program to the rest of the block, the faded poster reading HANK MCCOY OF THE NEW DEFENDERS, the second bed that had once belonged to his big brother Ted, now a lawyer, and realized that not only didn't the room fit him anymore, he was faintly embarrassed about it. Somehow in the nine months he'd been gone, this room had changed from "where he was going" into "where he'd been."

He'd been on real radio now, at least the campus station. He'd lived away from home in the dorms, found that there were other mutants in the world, met real super heroes, or close enough to super heroes anyway. When he'd started out on this trip, summer at home had seemed like a pleasant break from the constant pressures of campus life. Now his old room was looking like a prison, a misguided museum to someone who didn't exist anymore.

It wouldn't have been so bad if he'd been the only one to see it, but Chill was staying with him until he could find a place of his own in town, and Pound was bunking on the foldout in the basement for a few days before going home to Indiana.

The door opened and Chill popped in—still wearing his McCloud Cold Storage coveralls—greeted him with a nod, and fell heavily into his brother's old bed.

"So," asked Recall, "how was the first day on the job?"

"Backbreaker, man. I never knew frozen fish could be so heavy. Why couldn't I have gotten some keen antigravity powers?"

Recall had a sudden pang of guilt, not only because it was his father who had worked Chill so hard, but because he didn't have to work through the summer to pay for school. "Sorry."

Chill managed a weary smile. "Hey, don't take it wrong, pard. I'm grateful that your dad was willing to give me this job just on your recommendation, and I've had much worse jobs. Plus, I'll never have to worry about getting run off because of my genetic makeup. It took me a while to catch on, but it's clear there is one unwritten and unbreakable rule at

McCloud Cold Storage. We do not use the M-word in the workplace, not even me."

Recall blinked in surprise. "Huh?"

He shrugged. "It's just clear that everybody there knows about the boss's kid, and they know not to talk about it if they want to keep their jobs."

Recall swung around and put his feet on the floor, leaning forward as though proximity might somehow help his comprehension. "Are you sure, because I must have been in there a hundred times and nobody—" He stopped, suddenly realizing what he was saying, and what they never had.

"There are some pretty rough customers down there in the warehouse, Recall. I bet some of them even go home and turn on Walt Norman every night, but they hold their tongues at work, you bet." He chuckled. "It's strange, it isn't really right, but it is nice to see someone else discriminated against in the workplace besides me."

Recall wasn't amused. "Chill, you've got to believe, I had no idea things were that way."

"Hey, spud, family is always the last to know. Your folks are just trying to protect you, I guess, even if they're probably going about it all the wrong way."

Of course it was wrong, just as it was wrong that he should even need protecting because of a simple accident of birth. The whole situation symptomized a fundamental flaw in the world, one that he felt powerless to change, or even attack.

There was a knock at the door. "You boys decent?" It was his mom's voice.

"Come on in, Ma."

Chill rolled off the bed and stood. "Hi, Mrs. McCloud."

She smiled at him. "Hello, Peter. Mr. McCloud says you did good work at the warehouse today. He thinks you'll work out just fine."

He shrugged. "The work just comes naturally to me, of course."

Her face glazed over, and her voice suddenly became as cold as Chill's hands on a first date. "It's just a matter of applying yourself. Anyone can do it, really."

Chill gave him an *I told you so* look. "Listen, I should go grab a shower and change into my civvies. See you guys in a while." He stepped out, closing the door after him.

Recall's mom watched him go. "He seems like a nice enough boy."

For a mutant? "Ma, why did you do that? Chill is a mutant, just like me. He can't help it, it's just what he is. Why is that so difficult to accept?"

She looked uncomfortable, smoothing the legs of her jeans. "Of course there's nothing wrong with that, Scooter. Peter is a very nice boy, and his genetic—differences don't have anything to do with that. But simply because one is different is no reason to advertise it."

"Chill, Ma. He likes to be called Chill. I like to be called Recall. I don't like Scooter. I've never liked Scooter, and I can't imagine why you decided to name me that."

"Scooter is a perfectly fine name. It was your grandfather's name, and it was good enough for him."

Recall laughed harshly. "If he didn't hate it, too, I'll disown the family."

His mother put her hands on her hips, her face hardening into a familiar, angry frown. "So instead you want us to call you by some kind of secret mutant name?"

"It's a nickname, Ma. That's all. My friends gave it to me as a sign of affection, and I happen to like it, okay?"

She shook her head. "It's not okay, Scooter. What if somebody found out your secret?"

He jumped off the bed without even knowing why. "It's not a secret! It's what I am! I know it. You know it. Everybody in that warehouse of yours knows it, and pretending like they don't won't make it go away. I am not ashamed of what I am, Ma, and I'm not afraid of it either. You and Dad stop protecting me like I was some deformed infant or something. I can take care of myself!"

He rushed past her, downstairs and out the front door without any idea of where he was going.

Chill found him sitting on the end of the front walk, looking out at a tree-lined street full of neat houses and big cars where he'd once played, and where he no longer belonged. Chill sat down next to him, wearing the oversized T-shirt and baggy shorts that he favored, even in the dead of winter. He said nothing for a while, as though afraid Recall might bolt if he made a sudden noise. "You know," he finally said, "I really can't afford a place by myself. I could sure use a roommate

to share the expenses. It'd be nice to have one I know I could get along with. I'd hate to wake up to Walt Norman on my roomie's clock radio."

Recall sat up straight. "You mean me?"

"You'd have to find some way to keep up your end of the expenses, of course."

"I'll flip burgers if I have to."

Chill grinned. "Might do you some good." He saw Recall's reaction. "Hey, no offense, pard. Listen, I heard what you said to your mom in there. Takes guts to just come out and say the truth, especially to people you love." He socked Recall playfully on the arm. "I'm proud of you, spud."

Recall smiled. "Thanks. You know what they say, the truth will set you free."

"Yeah."

"So, why do I feel like I'm just getting started?"

They pulled into an RV park outside Chicago just after five. The Xabago and its more elegant companion occupied two adjacent spaces near the back of the park.

After settling in, Sean and Emma announced that they had a dinner appointment with a genetic scientist from a nearby university, an old friend of Hank McCoy's. While Sean went to unhook the sports car, Emma gathered the kids in the big RV and gave them instructions for the evening.

"Now," said Emma firmly, "I want you to stay put. We'll be here for several days, so there will be plenty of time for sightseeing later when Sean and I are around to go with you. If you get a craving for takeout, order in a pizza or something." She headed for the door, but paused as though she'd had an afterthought. "Oh, and I'll call occasionally just to check on you."

"Ms. Frost," complained Jubilee, "we aren't babies. Why are you treating us like we were? I mean, don't you trust us or something?"

Emma looked away evasively, knowing there was no right way to answer the question. "It's just that we've run into a lot of trouble on this trip, under suspicious circumstances. If it finds us again, I'd just as soon Sean and I were around to help get you out of it."

Jubilee moaned dramatically.

Emma frowned. "That's enough of that. You kids find a movie on the dish or something and have a good evening. We'll be back before midnight."

Paige watched out the window as they drove away. "Too bad my appearance on Walt Norman isn't tonight."

Jubilee smiled knowingly. "And too bad they don't have an appointment scheduled during the show."

Paige frowned at her. "Jubes, you're up to something." She looked around and saw the faces of the rest of the group, and realized that they were all up to something. "Okay, what's the deal? How would you know when their appointments are, anyway?"

Jubilee held up a small electronic device a little bigger than a compact. She flipped it open to reveal a keyboard and small screen. "It's a pocket organizer," she explained, "the same model Emma carries." She grinned smugly. "Did you know you can download the files from one of these to another in just a few seconds? Somehow," she looked up innocently, "I got copies of all Emma's schedule files in here. I know everything she has planned for the rest of the trip, every phone number, every person she plans to contact."

Paige held her hand out. "Give."

Jubilee snatched it away. "Not so fast, girlfriend. You don't just need information, you need a plan." She gestured at the rest of the team. "We have a plan to cover your escape to the studio, but the catch is, we come with you."

"No."

Jubilee tucked the organizer in her pocket. "No pain, no gain. We go as a team, or we don't go at all."

Paige sighed, looked them all over. "There's no way I can talk you out of this?"

They all shook their heads.

"Well, then, I guess we're a team."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



“Somebody asked me the other day, ‘Walt, why haven’t you had any mutants on your show before?’ Simple, really, none of them ever call. I guess they’re afraid of mean old Walt Norman. [*chuckles*] I don’t know why. I’m not afraid of them. Am I, Mrs. Dale? No, of course not. If Magneto himself were to walk in here and ask to be put on the show, I’d do it in a heartbeat. I’m not afraid of him. Except for one thing. He might erase all our tapes. [*laughter*]”

—transcript from *The Walt Norman Show*

The Expatriate smiled at the e-mail on his screen. The World Federalists, the few of them that were left, were asking, no, begging, for his assistance in regrouping and gaining their revenge against the hated United States. They went so far as to offer to take him as their new leader, as though that were some sort of greatly desired plum.

In fact, he didn't find these remaining stragglers good recruits for his own organization. While some of them doubtless had useful skills, and perhaps were competent enough, terrorists were all, in their own way, idealistic fools. He found them to be neither dependable nor trustworthy in an organization such as his. Give him the lowest mercenary over an idealist any day.

No, better to cut ties with them before they did him some real harm by association. This would be his last communication with the World Federalists. His finger was poised over the DELETE button when the phone rang.

It was Ivan. "The Mandroids are fully operational. I've assigned the occupants, and we've been drilling in the warehouse all night. I will pilot the 'Peg' unit, of course."

"You're sure your people are ready for this? These are complex weapons." The Expatriate had spent some time running "Peg" through its paces the day before, and had had some opportunity to experience the difficulties firsthand. Despite his vast technical knowledge, combat experience, expertise with weapons, and quick learning skills, the armor had been a real challenge.

"Of course, my friend. I've had fifteen candidates training on computer simulations for weeks and chose only the top six candidates for the mission. Three of them have previous powered-armor experience. Gonzalez was a Guardsman at the Vault before entering our employ."

"Excellent. How are our young mutants?"

"Still at their RV park. We have them under surveillance, and will know when and where they move. Intercepting them shouldn't be a problem."

The Expatriate looked at his watch. Ten minutes to the warehouse and ten minutes back. "I have a meeting with Norman in an hour, which gives me just enough time to brief our people personally. Have them standing by."

"Of course. This is a great day, my friend."

"A great day indeed." He hung up the phone, grabbed his coat, and rushed out the door. Only later did it occur to him that he'd forgotten to delete the message on his screen.

Jubilee peered through the bedroom door to make sure Sean or Emma wasn't close enough to hear, then put the phone back to her mouth. "Just do it, Recall. You're in radio. You can disguise your voice, and you can sell Sean that it's for real. You've got the number, right? Good, then call back in fifteen minutes. That should be early enough for them to change their plans, but late enough that they don't have too much time to think about it." She smiled. "Great. Do a good job and I'll fix you up with Paige."

Paige turned back from the bedroom window where she was keeping watch and gave Jubilee a dirty look.

"Right, bye." Jubilee closed the phone. "Okay, that's taken care of. Now all we have to do is call their ten A.M. appointment and move it till lunch."

Paige looked skeptical. "What makes you think this guy is going to be able to move his schedule around at the last minute like this?"

Jubilee rolled her eyes. "He's like, some kind of writer. Those guys never work, and they'll do anything for a free lunch."

Paige held out her hand. "You'd better let me make the call. Somehow, I don't think you know enough about writers to pull it off."

She peeked out the window one last time, then opened the phone and dialed. She held it to her ear. "It's ringing," she said. "Mr. Berggren?" She tried to make her voice throatier, like Emma's. "This is Emma Frost. Yes. Yes. There's been a little problem with our appointment this morning. Could we possibly do lunch instead? Fine? Noon. Where?" She named an Italian restaurant they'd found in the phone book, one comfortably far from both the park where they were staying and the Norman studios.

Jubilee paced while Paige talked. Paige signaled for her to stop. It was making her nervous. "What? You know a better place?" They'd already given the location to Recall. "Well, you are the local, but this is—uh—highly recommended.

Um—Professor Xavier himself told me I should try it. What? It's owned by his uncle, sir, he might take offense at that assessment."

Jubilee pulled aside the curtain and practically jumped back. She silently mouthed, *Emma's coming*, even as Paige heard the RV's door opening.

"Mr. Berggren, I have to insist. There are things I can't explain. This is a matter of—uh—life and death. Just meet us there, and be prompt!"

She slapped the phone shut just as the bedroom door opened and Emma looked in. "Everything okay?"

Paige slipped the phone behind her back and tucked it into the waistband of her jeans. It gouged her painfully, but she ignored it. Paige chuckled nervously. "Sure. Jubilee was just telling me how she likes—baseball. She sure would like to see a Cubs game while we're here."

Emma looked at her curiously. "Baseball? I had no idea."

Jubilee shrugged. "It's, uh, not the game, really, I just like the peanuts."

"Well," said Emma, "maybe Sean can be talked into taking you, though I don't think he knows baseball from rounders. I've never had much use for such things personally, unless of course one watches it from the owner's box. I'm going to fix a watercress sandwich for lunch. Interested?"

Paige and Jubilee looked at each other and shook their heads.

"Not hungry," said Paige.

"Not hungry," echoed Jubilee.

"We'll just sit here and talk."

"About baseball."

"Baseball."

"Why don't you close the door behind you," suggested Jubilee, "so we don't, like, bore you or something?"

Emma looked at them curiously, but backed out of the room and closed the door anyway.

Paige stared at the door until she was sure Emma was really gone, then let out a long sigh of relief. "That was close."

Jubilee looked at her. "Baseball? Why didn't you use, like, golf or something? Go for the gusto. Geeze."

Walt Norman arrived at the studio early to find that, for once, McComb wasn't there. He looked at his watch. They had a meeting scheduled in fifteen minutes, and Trent was nowhere to be found. This surprised him. McComb was normally there when he arrived in the morning, and there when he left at night. If he came in at odd hours, most often McComb was there. He even ordered his lunches in rather than going out with the rest of the crew.

Norman made a mental note of it. If McComb was late, it was simply one more infraction that he could hold over him, use as a club to keep him in line. It was becoming increasingly obvious that such a club was needed. For the last six months, McComb had been drifting further into his own world, concentrating on some private agenda that Norman didn't fathom. Norman didn't like that. He needed McComb, if only to get through today's broadcast. After that . . . Well, they'd see. Certainly, after today's show, Walt Norman wouldn't need anyone ever again.

He looked around the empty studio, then had an inspiration. They were supposed to meet in McComb's office. It would be more dramatic, a better display of dominance, if Norman were there waiting for him.

He left the studio and walked down the hall to McComb's office. The door was locked, of course, but Norman fished in his pocket and pulled out a key ring. He didn't like McComb's secretive nature, and he'd bribed a custodian for a copy of the master key months ago. He'd never used it until now, knowing that once he did, McComb would immediately change his locks. He'd been holding it in reserve for such an occasion.

He chuckled as he felt the sharp, unworn key in his hand, the edges still polished from the grinder. He'd say to McComb that he'd found the office unlocked, not tell him about the key. Perhaps he'd buy that, and Norman would still have the key for another day.

He entered the office and shut the door behind him, not bothering to turn on the lights. The computer monitor glowed in the darkened office, guiding him to McComb's chair. He sat down and glanced at the document on the screen. He was about to look away, when the words *World Federalist* jumped out at him.

"Lunch?" Emma frowned at Sean, who had just entered the girls' RV and reported his phone call. "I've already eaten."

"That's what he said, and he was quite insistent." Sean showed her the paper where he'd written down an address. "There's a map in the car, I think."

"I'll drive," said Emma, "and we'll stop for directions. I'm not going to spend the rest of the day wandering lost in Chicago just to save your manly pride."

Sean chuckled. "Aye, lass, if you say so."

She sighed. "Maybe we should just cancel."

Sean shook his head. "Berggren is one of the leading human advocates of mutant rights. Charles keeps the man's book on his desk. If we miss this, he won't be pleased."

"Well, if we must, we must. I suppose the children won't complain if we let them order another pizza."

Sean chuckled. "Only if it means they can't have another one for dinner."

Everett was sitting in the Xabago's top-gun seat, playing look-out for the rest. "There they go," he said, watching as the little white car backed out and drove away.

Jubilee nodded. "Time to book. Everybody got your ski masks?"

Each of them held up one. They were in an assortment of garish colors. Everett had found them at a sporting goods store a few blocks from the RV park, but he'd cleaned them out in the process and hadn't been able to pick and choose. In any case, Paige had insisted they all have the masks. There was no way of knowing in advance how close the rest of the team would have to get to the studio, and it was vital that none of them be traced back from the show.

Angelo looked at the transit map they'd borrowed from the park office. "You sure we shouldn't just take the Xabago?"

Paige shook her head. "Too conspicuous, too difficult to drive in town. If we take transit, it makes us flexible and difficult to trace."

Angelo thumbed on the image inducer and put it in his pocket. "Well," he said, "we've got ten minutes to walk to the station."

Pound didn't look happy at all as he backed out of the driveway of Recall's parents' house. Recall came trotting down the walk and vaulted into the passenger seat.

Pound, normally easygoing, looked tired and grumpy. "Now will you explain why you interrupted a perfectly good nap?"

"I've just got the feeling that Paige and the others are in some kind of trouble. Jubilee had me call and trick Mr. Cassidy into moving an appointment he and Ms. Frost had today. She wouldn't say why, but I had the feeling they wanted to get them out of the way this afternoon."

Pound chuckled. "Maybe they just want to have a kegger."

Recall frowned and stared straight ahead. "Nope. Remember my power. If they were having a party, I'd be able to find it."

The Expatriate realized something was wrong when he put his key in the lock and it turned too easily. He didn't hear the bolt click back. The door had already been unlocked.

He considered quickly. His gun was inside the office, but the odds of there being a serious threat inside were slim. He reached into his coat pocket and found the comforting grip of the stubby knife he kept there. He slipped it out of its scabbard without removing it from his pocket, then quietly opened the door and stepped inside.

He snapped on the light to find Norman sitting in his chair, leaning back, arms crossed over his chest, a strange half-smile on his face. The Expatriate glanced at the computer screen and did a double take. *Sloppy. How many operations had been brought down by just such a last-minute slip?*

"Trent," said Norman, "you're fired."

"What?" He gestured at the screen. "Because of that?"

"You're consorting with terrorists, Trent. I'm shocked and amazed."

His mind raced, trying to build a plausible cover story, trying to find a way to salvage the plan. "I'm not consorting with them. They contacted me. They're a source. I've been manipulating them for the good of the show. I was going to tell you all about it at the meeting."

"I don't think so, Trent. I haven't figured out exactly what you've been up to, but I'm betting that it's all right here in

your computer. I'm not much good with the things myself, but we can get some experts in here." He paused for effect. "Maybe the FBI."

The Expatriate stepped closer. It was worse than he'd imagined. The plan would have to be abandoned, or modified. He shifted the knife in his hand and moved closer to Norman. He could slit the man's throat before he could scream, hide the body until just before airtime. "Peg" could still be seen in the building, maybe brandishing a bloody knife. There might still be a way. He took another step closer.

"Don't bother to clean out your desk, Trent." Norman unfolded his arms, exposing the pistol he'd hidden in his right hand. "I've already done it for you."

He pointed the pistol clumsily, but the Expatriate saw that he'd managed to figure out how to take off the safety. "Trent, we go back a long way. I'm not convinced from what I've found here that you really had a part in this terrorist business, but you see how I can't keep you around anymore. I'm going to let you walk out of here, and give you until after the program before I call someone to look at this computer. I'll ask Frank or Susan to fill in for you, tell them you had a family emergency. Only you know how deep you are in this thing, and so only you know how far you have to run. But I suspect—" he smiled slightly "—this is 'good-bye.'"

The Expatriate backed slowly out the door. Certainly he could disarm Norman, but perhaps not without his firing and alerting the whole building. But he had another plan, and Norman's generosity had given him just enough time to carry it out. In the hall, he checked his pocket to be sure his cell phone was still there. He waited until he was out in the street to call Ivan. "Change of plan," he said. "Send over the 'Peg' suit in the van. I'll meet them in front of the corner deli by the studio. You know the one. You'll lead the team against our young friends, and I'll take on Norman."

"I don't understand."

The Expatriate walked hurriedly down the street, crowded with early lunch traffic. "Just stop those mutants and let me take care of the plan." He hesitated. Ivan deserved better than that. "Norman fired me, but right now he's the only one who knows it, and he isn't going to be telling anyone after I'm through with him."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



It is important for the field operative to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the Mandroid family of Powered Armor Mobile Weapons Platforms (PAMWP). For sheer firepower, they can be matched and bettered by tanks and other conventional armor units. Their speed can be bested by any number of ground and airborne units. Their ability to absorb damage is exceeded by most conventional armored units.

Excelling in these areas is not their true strength. It is, rather, the combination of significant high-technology firepower, good survivability, and fair speed in a stealthy and agile package that enhances the natural ability of a good soldier.

You do not operate your Mandroid as you might drive a car. You become part of the Mandroid, and it becomes part of you. Remember this, as you and your Mandroid will live and die together on the battlefield.

—S.H.I.E.L.D. training document

The northbound Edens Expressway was jammed up like a slow drain as Emma crept the little car along with the traffic. Sean, meanwhile, was trying to make sense of the directions they'd gotten from a reluctant convenience-store clerk. "I really don't think he had any idea where we we're going."

Emma pushed a windblown strand of hair out of her eyes and gave him an annoyed look. "I thought you said there was a map in the glove compartment."

For the third time since they'd started the drive, he flipped open the little door and pawed through the contents. "I'm sure I did. I haven't a clue where the blasted thing got off to."

"Yes, Sean," she said, sarcasm dripping from her voice, "I'm sure Sentinels slipped in last night and stole it as part of their master plan." She tossed her head. "If you'd really left it there, it would be there. Are you sure you don't want me to help with your memory just a little bit?"

He slumped down in the seat, putting his knees up against the dashboard. "Stay out of m'head, woman. I know what I know, and it was here yesterday." He watched as they crept under a sign announcing an upcoming exit. "I wonder what's got this all backed up. I'd fly up and have a look if I could get away with it."

"Humans have this thing called a 'radio,' " she said dryly. "Why don't you see if you can find a traffic report?"

She clicked it on and tuned to the first AM station he could find. "*—Walt Norman Show.*" Sean sneered at the mention of the man's name. "Don't miss this afternoon's show when Walt interviews the mutant mystery girl Peg about the mutant agenda and her role in the terrorist attack on Mt. Rushmore. Don't be the one who misses it!"

Emma stared at the radio with concern. "Sean, he couldn't possibly be talking about one of our girls, could he?"

Sean wrinkled his brow, distressed by the thought. "Ah, sure an' no. That Norman is shameless. He probably just hired some drama student to come and pretend to be a mutant for an hour or two. That's all it is."

He leaned his elbow out the window and examined an ad for *The Walt Norman Show* displayed on a nearby billboard. He realized that a traffic report was just finishing up on the radio, and he hadn't been listening to it. Impulsively he

reached down between the seats and took out the cell phone. "I should call Dr. Berggren and let him know we'll be late."

He dialed. "Hello, may I speak with Dr. Berggren. This is? I'm sorry, sir, yer voice sounds different than when you called me this morning. What? You didn't?" He held the mute button and turned to Emma. "He says that you called and set the lunch up with him, not the other way around. Does that make any sense?"

"It does if somebody wanted us on the road when Walt Norman's show was on the air."

Sean slammed his fist down on top of the car door. He picked up the phone again. "I'm sorry, there's been an emergency and we'll have to reschedule. We'll call you—really this time. I'll explain later. Sorry." He hung up the phone, then dialed the number of the kids' cell phone. After ten rings there was no answer. "We've got to get back there, quick."

They were coming up on an exit, and Emma was able to get off and reenter the freeway in the other direction, but if anything, the traffic there was worse. Sean slammed his hands down on top of the windshield. "Are these people daft? It's lunchtime, for God's sake. Go home, all of ye!"

Emma stared at the driver of the red minivan in front of them. *Get out of the way.* Sean heard her telepathic "voice" forcefully—the driver obediently pulled over against the railing. *Get out of the way* again, and the traffic started calmly parting in front of them like water before Moses. *Get out of the way.*

The car surged forward, its motor deepening to a throaty roar. Emma seemed totally focused, though Sean couldn't be sure if it was the driving or the telepathy that was taking more of her concentration. "Lass, y'r a miracle worker." But as he said it, he knew that even at this pace it would still take them at least ten minutes to get back to the RV park.

The train bounced along the overhead track, rocking gently as it did. The kids sat on either side of the aisle, all of them looking at the cell phone in Jubilee's hand.

"You should have answered it," said Angelo. "That's why we brought it."

Jubilee glared at him. "Yeah, right, like they couldn't just hear that we were on a train. Don't be so lame, Angelo."

Paige's hands were held in tense fists in front of her, clenched until the knuckles turned white. "So now they know we aren't home."

Jubilee rolled her eyes. "So they don't know anything. That's the point, right? They might wonder, but they're half-way across town by now, and they'll just figure we all booked down to the arcade or something."

Angelo shook his head.

Jubilee stuck the phone out at him angrily. "You want the phone? You carry the phone. Then you can make the call."

Angelo held up his palms. "No way, *chica*. You take the heat."

She held out the phone to Paige. "You take it."

Paige just looked miserable, as though she might throw up at any moment. Jubilee suddenly felt bad about harassing her. "Sorry, girl," Jubilee said. "Didn't mean nothing by it."

"I'll take the phone," said Monet.

Jubilee just glared at her and stuck the phone back in her pocket.

"Why," asked Monet, looking toward the rear of the car, "would a man with a walkie-talkie be following us?"

Paige looked at her. "What man?" She kept her voice low.

"The one in the back row, blue suit and the short haircut. He got on at the station with us."

"It's probably a ham radio operator," said Jono.

"It's probably just another cell phone," said Jubilee.

"It's probably a transit security guard," said Angelo, "waiting for some excuse to hassle us."

Paige chuckled unenthusiastically. "We are getting so paranoid."

"This is Watcher One. Targets are leaving the train. Confirmed, targets are leaving the train."

Ivan smiled inside his armor. It had been an uncomfortable hour riding enclosed in it as the truck bounced along after their quarry, but now the ordeal was paying off. He released the safeties, and the Mandroid, which had previously been heavy and inert around his body, suddenly purred to life. He engaged the radio loop that connected him with his troops. "This is Combat One. Sound off. Gonzalez."

A woman's voice, "Combat Two, armed."

"Vogle."

"Combat Three, ready."

"Sledge."

"Combat Four, go."

"Petra."

"Combat Five," said another woman's voice. "Let's kick some butt."

"This is it," he announced. "Stay in radio contact at all times. The truck will circle and meet us three blocks west for pickup."

He heard the air brakes through his audio pickups as the truck stopped. The Mandroids clumped heavily into motion, shuffling in a line toward the rear of the truck. The big door in the back rolled open, and they dived out one after the other, like paratroopers in an old war movie.

When Sean and Emma roared into the RV park, the only kids they found there were Recall and Dog Pound, sitting in front of the Xabago in Pound's Cadillac.

Sean jumped out of the car and ran over to Recall. "Have ye seen our kids?"

"We were just looking for them. I thought something might be wrong when they asked me to—" He stopped in midsentence and looked uncomfortable.

Sean's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "That was ye on the phone this morning, wasn't it?"

Recall hung his head. "Yes, sir. Jubilee asked me to do it, but she wouldn't tell me why."

"Could it have something to do with *The Walt Norman Show*?"

Recall started at the name, and Sean realized he was on the right track.

"Ye know something, don't ye, lad?"

He hesitated. "Paige has been calling Norman's show since early in the trip."

He threw his hands up. "I should have known it when I caught them listening to his show." He looked back at Recall. "Did you know she was going to be on it in person?"

His eyes went wide. Pound leaned around him and stared in disbelief. "No," said Recall, and he seemed sincere about it.

Sean looked around the empty camp. "They're already on their way, but they didn't drive. We might still catch them. Recall, can you track the kids with your power?"

He considered. "Most of the time I just homed in on the RVs during the trip. They're bigger and easier to track. But," he said, "I think I could home in on Paige."

Sean waved Emma over. "This'll be easier in one car, and we can't all fit in that one. Pound, you better be a good driver, because we'll need to go fast."

Dog Pound pulled himself up straight in his seat. "Yes, sir, Mr. Cassidy. I had all the top scores on Daytona at the student union."

Sean was halfway into the backseat, but he hesitated. "That's very reassuring, lad."

The van carrying the Expatriate and his modified Mandroid armor circled the block, looking for a drop-off point. In order to make the "killer mutant" story work, he'd have to enter the building through the front door, but it wouldn't do for him to be seen emerging from the bogus parcel delivery van, especially if he planned to use it to escape afterward.

The armor was too tall for the van, and lay on an inclined platform aiming down toward the rear doors. An electric hoist could raise and lower the end of the platform to street level in only a few seconds, and the doors were rigged to open and close automatically with its movement. It was dark in the van but, thanks to the air-conditioning unit chugging on the roof, not unduly warm.

"There's a utility truck parked in the alley next to the studio," the voice of the driver came over his armor's headset. "It's a meter reader. He should move soon."

The Expatriate squirmed in the armor, feeling slightly claustrophobic and very impatient. He tried to occupy himself by running through the armor's computer control sequences, but the exercise didn't work. He'd been through them all a hundred times, and he knew them inside and out. He was ready. Unfortunately, he was also early, and it wouldn't do to loiter around in this getup—plus, he wanted Norman on the air when he arrived.

He called up the interface for the voice box experimentally and chose a phrase from the menu. "Walt Norman," the box said, "my name is Peg, and I'm here to kill you in the name of all mutantkind."

• • •

The old man stood on the corner near the elevated train tracks, dressed in a tattered wool coat, a hunter's cap with flaps pulled down over his ears, and gloves. This wouldn't have been so strange, thought Angelo, if it hadn't been eighty degrees in the shade. He looked at them with wet, red-rimmed eyes and shook a tin cup that seemed to have a few nickels rattling around in the bottom, but what really got their attention was the crude, hand-lettered sign he carried. It read, *MUTANT, PLEASE HELP.*

"Oh, man," said Everett as they approached the panhandler, "talk about your target audience."

Angelo smiled. Everett was such a soft touch. "Just keep your eyes straight ahead. Better yet," he said, pointing, "there's the Sears Tower." But it was a lost cause. Everett was digging in his pocket for change. "He's no mutant. It's just part of the act, Ev, like the broken-down car story or the hungry-kid story or the wounded-veteran story."

The man nodded gratefully as Everett dropped a handful of coins into the cup with a loud clatter.

Angelo paused. "You want to see a mutant?" he asked, looking around warily. He leaned close to the man and clicked off the image inducer, just for a second.

To his surprise, the old guy didn't flinch at all. Instead, the old man's stare fixed behind them, and his eyes went wide. "Sentinels!" The man pointed behind them before turning and trotting away.

Angelo groaned. "*Dios*, this guy has got the whole act going."

Then a seven-foot-tall robot guy stepped in front of him and knocked Monet against a wall so hard that her outline was visible cratered into the bricks.

Emma drove. Sean and Recall sat in the backseat. Pound sat in the front passenger seat, hands covering his face, peeking through his fingers as they squeaked through the openings that Emma was telepathically creating in traffic. "If we smash this car, my dad will kill me. It once belonged to the She-Hulk."

"That," said Recall grimly, "was just a tale the salesman told him."

"Please," said Pound, "no 'tail' jokes. Not now."

"I wouldn't think of it," said Recall, as the car ducked through a parking lot and up an alley to avoid an especially tight knot of traffic, the undercarriage scraping on every dip and rain gutter. "Told you to fix those shocks," said Recall. Then to Emma, "They aren't moving so fast now. I think they're inside the Loop somewhere, maybe stationary, maybe on foot."

"They're almost to Norman's studios." Sean looked at his watch. "We aren't gonna make it."

They squealed out of the alley, making a sharp right turn onto the street, fishtailing wildly, then ran a slalom between taxicabs. There was a whiff of sauerkraut as their right mirror missed a hot dog cart by about a millimeter.

"At least," said Recall, "we can listen to it on the radio."

The platform slid down out of the van with an electric *whirr*, the doors swinging smoothly open in front of the Expatriate. The bottom of the platform hit the pavement with a thud and he sat up quickly, tipping the Mandroid clumsily to its feet. The gyros *whirred* and saved him any further embarrassment. Behind him the back of the van was already closing. He looked around the empty alley and the loading docks ahead. It seemed that he was unobserved. "Pickup here in thirty minutes—one hour at the secondary point across the Chicago River."

He marched out of the alley, the armor making his movements seem slower and yet effortless at the same time. A woman in a red suit covered her mouth to stifle a scream, then turned and ran in the other direction. A group of Japanese tourists down the block pointed and suddenly reversed course away from him. He smiled. That was the intended effect.

He walked into the lobby of the building, creating more panic. The guard stood behind his desk. To his credit, he held his ground as the disguised Mandroid approached.

He keyed the voice interface. "I am here for *The Walt Norman Show*. I am Peg."

The guard's face was pasty white. His hand came away from the unbuttoned holster where it had been resting only a moment before. He pointed past a planter full of rubber plants at the bank of elevators. "Sixth floor."

The Expatriate turned and walked toward the elevator, try-

ing to pretend he had never seen the building before, hadn't come this way every morning for almost two years. Each step, familiar and yet strange, brought him closer to his goal.

Walt Norman was already dead. He just didn't know it yet.

"This is Watcher One, they're right in front of you."

Ivan saw the group of six kids with the panhandler. He recognized them from photos and previous encounters. The fleshy gray one was missing, but a Hispanic youth was with them. Then, to his surprise, the Hispanic youth seemed to turn into the gray mutant, just for a second. A shapechanger?

"You've made them. The bum is not a target. Get close and attack. Don't let them get away. This is primarily a delaying action, but take them down if you need to."

He rushed in and backhanded the dark-skinned girl. Intelligence reports from Rushmore indicated she might be the most dangerous of the bunch. She slammed against an adjacent building with the force of a car wreck. Too bad if he killed her on the first blow, but he'd learned never to underestimate a threat.

The blonde spun toward him, her skin shredding as she did, revealing a dull glint of metal underneath. Was she somehow a disguised robot too?

Then Combat Two hit her with a concussion cannon and she was blown into the side of a parked car, caving the driver's door into the car's interior.

He turned his attention back to the Hispanic boy, and was surprised as the gray aspect suddenly returned. Ivan raised his arms, warming up the needler miniguns, but the boy put his hands over his head. At first Ivan thought he was surrendering, and hesitated, when suddenly the boy's arms and fingers shot up like a pack of whips, snagging the overhead structure that supported the El tracks. Then the boy snapped up and away from him, his extended arms allowing him to swing beneath the tracks like a monkey.

The tall boy in black reached for the scarf that always covered the lower half of his face and ripped it away. He was turning toward Ivan, who saw an angry orange glow that suddenly flared.

There were four, no, five of them. Chamber could see eyes through the vision slits. These toy soldiers were armored, not robots. They'd taken out M and Husk hard and fast, but he thought he'd spotted the leader of the bunch. He was thinking of Paige as he spun and let loose the strongest biokinetic blast that he dared.

The armored figure slammed into the street as though pulled by an invisible spring, crashing into the stainless-steel side of a milk tanker stopped for a light. A seam split, and white fluid began to gush out into the street as the armored form reeled momentarily, then fell back, ducking under the truck.

He heard falling masonry to his right, and spotted M pulling herself free of the half-collapsed brick wall. She didn't seem hurt, only shaken and very annoyed. Another of the armored units trotted from behind a pillar and, before Jono could react, fired something at her with a loud pop. Something small flew at her, then exploded just before impact in a collection of tan-colored snakes that wrapped themselves around M and constricted. She staggered, then fell, struggling against the tangled mess.

The unit that had fired the tangle bomb turned toward him. He let loose another blast before it could draw a bead on him.

He ducked between parked cars, looking for the rest of them. Just up the street, Jubilee and Synch were double-teaming another unit, Jubes distracting it with fireworks while Synch, who seemed to be using both Skin and Husk's power, wrapped him in the blue steel straps that were his fingers.

Husk had climbed out of the smashed car, and was now using the shattered door like a shield against a unit armed with a flamethrower. He was looking for a target when the car to his right was suddenly rolled aside, leaving him completely exposed to the armored leader's weapons.

Angelo watched the battle raging in the street below with frustration. These tin guys were both tough and strong. There seemed to be little he could do short of trying not to get killed. Then he saw one of the suits walk under him, marked with streaks of milk from the truck Jono had blasted him into. He spotted Jono, and was about to shout a warning when the walking tank unexpectedly rolled the car into the street to get

at Jono. He could see Jono crouched behind the next car, caught like a deer in headlights.

What the hell. He used the stretch in his fingers to slingshot himself down from the El track, landed on the thing's armored back, and, wrapping his arms tightly around the head, cut off its vision. It was like riding a bull as the armor stumbled backward, arms flailing. A cannon of some sort misfired, blowing in a row of second-story windows on a nearby office building. Angelo was relieved to see the FOR LEASE sign on the adjacent windows.

Then the ride was over as a huge armored hand grabbed his right leg in a vise grip and yanked him loose, throwing him through the air like a pop fly headed for deep left field.

Synch looked around. M was trapped, Husk was cornered, Chamber was reeling, and Skin had just been tossed out of his field of vision like a used tissue. "Jubilee, we've got to take this guy down, turn the fight around!"

Reluctantly, he tapped a bit of M's super strength and drew his skin back from the struggling robot, which he pushed back against an El support pillar, then punched as hard as he could, straight into the center of the chest. There was a huge clang that made his whole body vibrate, but he'd only made a fist-sized hole in the armor, surrounded by cracks.

Then he saw Jubilee, a look of rage and determination on her face as she spun, liquid fire shooting from her fingertips, filling the opening. Instinctively he ducked as the collected energy let loose with the force of a bomb.

Angelo was flailing through the air helplessly toward a glass storefront when some instinct remembered his kite stunt over the Xabago days before. He relaxed his skin, spreading out, letting the air balloon him up like a parachute. He slowed, fluttered like a leaf, then managed to get some control over his flight and was gliding clumsily back into the thick of things.

Chamber cowered behind the overturned car as projectiles whistled over his head from the leader's weapons. He realized that if he couldn't get out from behind the car, he'd have to use it. He tensed his legs and jumped straight backward, firing

a blast as he did, sending him one way and the car in the other. It smashed into the leader, then into the wall behind him, making an armored sandwich.

He would have smiled if he could, but first he had to land without killing himself. He rolled, trying to get his legs under him as the pavement came up. Then a rubbery gray trampoline appeared out of nowhere and cushioned his fall. He bounced and managed to land on his feet after the recoil.

Skin smiled at him, his hand spread like a spiderweb, anchored by extended fingers.

“Good save, mate.”

Synch looked up from behind his arm, to see the front of the armored thing peeled open like an orange. The red-haired woman inside seemed to be trying to extricate herself from the useless hulk and make an escape, but Jubilee rushed up, brandishing a handful of sparks. The woman froze.

He turned to see M, still struggling with the brownish stuff. “Don’t panic, M,” he called, “you’re invulnerable. You can fly. You don’t need to get loose.”

Understanding, she stopped struggling against the stuff, drawing herself into a ball, a ball that lifted off the sidewalk and began to whip back and forth through the air, hitting the remaining tin guys like a bowling ball hitting pins, drawing them closer together, not giving them time to fire. He could see Chamber to his right, and Synch with his bio-blasts. What M had given them was one compact, choice target. He and Chamber let loose at once.

Ivan was drifting when the sound of his faceplate being ripped away brought him back to consciousness. The blonde, now seemingly a statue made of lead, leaned close to him, as did the dark-skinned boy.

He tried to move, but his armor was inert, pinned between a wrecked car and a wall. He could only move his head. He wondered if he was dying, if he was paralyzed.

“What’s this about?” asked the girl. “Who do you work for?”

Ivan looked around. He could see overturned cars, wreckage everywhere, the smashed truck still leaking, and several Man-droids lying motionless in the street, another ripped open un-

der the El. The rest were missing. They'd lost. Five Mandroid troopers defeated by a handful of teenagers. It couldn't be. He heard sirens approaching.

"Tell us," said the dark boy with the shaved head.

Suddenly another face loomed close, or half of one, anyway. From the nose up it was a handsome teenage boy, and below, a gaping horror filled with a glowing energy that writhed like maggots in dead flesh. He tried to draw away.

"Tell us," repeated the boy, "or I'll let my friend Chamber here dump the rest of his can of whoop on your sorry butt."

Ivan looked over. The armor was dead, but the chronometer still worked. He smiled. It was too late. They couldn't stop it, and after it happened, they wouldn't be able to tell anyone. Anyone that mattered, anyway.

Ivan laughed harshly, making gurgling noises deep in his throat. "I work for the Expatriate. Even now, he is killing Walt Norman—" he looked at the blonde "—and putting the blame on you." The sirens were quite loud now. "You are an escaped killer," he said. "I suggest you run before the police get here."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



CAN NORMAN SUSTAIN RATINGS SPIKE?

The once top-rated, nationally syndicated *Walt Norman Show* was in a six-month ratings slump until a young caller electrified audiences by revealing herself to be a mutant and challenged his patented, humanist, antimutant stance. But can it last after the mystery girl makes her appearance on the show next week? Says Producer Trent McComb, "I have no doubt that this show will be on everyone's lips the next day, that listeners will get a show they'll never forget, and that will keep them coming back for more."

—*Radio Trade Weekly*

“**L**ordie,” said Sean, standing in his seat and looking over the roofs of the cars stopped ahead of them, “they’ve gone and trashed Chicago.” Or at least, it seemed, the next block. There were smashed building fronts, overturned cars, twisted metal, and broken glass covering the street like a carpet. A small fleet of emergency vehicles was on site, with more arriving. Sean remembered something the Angel had once said about the X-Men that seemed to apply to his own students as well: *You can generally tell where they’ve been.*

Recall stood in the backseat to get a better view. “It looks like they had help. Are the silver guys friends of yours?”

Sean leaned forward on the windshield frame and squinted at the closest of the silver figures laying sprawled in the street. “Those look like Mandroid armor. S.H.I.E.L.D. issue, but not with S.H.I.E.L.D. markings. Doesn’t look like their kind of work.” He turned back to Recall. “Are the kids here?”

Recall shook his head. “That way,” he pointed.

“They have to be headed for Norman’s studio,” said Emma.

Sean looked surprised. “After this? I know the kids are acting crazy, but they know that after something like this they should be headed to ground. What could be so blasted important?”

Emma opened her door and stepped out. “Sean, we’ve got to get there. This trouble is somehow tied to the show, and I have a feeling this is only the tip of it.”

Sean was muttering to himself. “Blasted kids. Why didn’t they talk t’us?”

“We’ll never get there in this traffic. Fly us there.”

“Me too,” said Recall. He saw their reaction. “I don’t weigh much. Besides, you may need me to find them.”

Sean nodded. “Aye, I can take you. It should only be a few blocks.”

Recall leaned over to address Pound. “Meet us there when you can, Spud.”

Pound frowned, clearly disappointed at being left behind. “Don’t mind me. I’ll just sit here and talk to the pigeons.”

Sean held out his hands to Emma and Recall. “Let’s fly.”

Marina, one of the interns, was clearly terrified as she led the Expatriate down the hall from the elevator to the studio. He couldn’t let on, of course, that he knew the way, that he’d been there thousands of times, and would be there thousands

of times yet again after he took over the show.

He thought of the brave, "spontaneous" speech he'd written to use after Norman's death, about how they would continue the show as his legacy, to carry on his message, and that his death shouldn't have been in vain. Oh well, he could still salvage most of it for tomorrow's broadcast. Of course he'd have lost some inertia, and he'd have to lobby to even get on the air tomorrow, but he was confident it could be done. To a network executive, death wasn't a tragedy, it was simply a call for spin control, and "Trent McComb" would offer them the best spin control they could get.

He could see Norman through the glass walls, hear his voice on the monitor speakers ranting about how Peg was late, and speculating that she was afraid. What would his reaction be? This was a moment to be savored.

Marina opened the door, and he edged through, having to duck and turn sideways to make the armor fit. Norman looked up and stopped in midsentence, eyes like dinner plates, his mouth flapping soundlessly.

He found his voice before his good sense came back. His first words were, "My God, you're ugly."

There was no response programmed into the voice box for that. *Oh, well.* "Walt Norman, I am Peg. America has been listening to you for years. Now they will listen to me. They will know what we do to humans who stand in our way."

Norman was too arrogant to even be afraid. His castle had been invaded by an upstart. "Now, see here, this is my show. You just sit down!"

He saw the chair Norman was pointing at. Probably the armor would have smashed it to bits, even if it had been agile enough for him to try. Somehow the thought was very funny.

No, time to end this. Using any of the weapons might give away the armor's true nature. Something dramatic would be better. He wondered if the fingers of the Mandroid's hand could wrap all the way around the back of Norman's head. He triggered the voice box again. "You must be silenced. Walt Norman, my name is Peg, and I'm here to kill you in the name of all mutantkind." Somewhere behind him, he heard a door open, but nobody could stop him now.

"No," squawked Norman, pushing himself away from the console in his rolling chair. "Get away from me."

Suddenly somebody stepped between him and Norman. It was Mrs. Dale. "Listen here. I feel sorry for you, but this won't do anyone any good."

Oh, yes, it will. But he hesitated. He'd felt a certain sympathy for the woman who, like him, had been a target of Norman's scorn. Besides, he'd often thought he'd be doing her a favor, depriving her of such a hateful, worthless son. She might even be an asset to *The Trent McComb Show*.

"Please," she said, "stay back."

What was that saying? *You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.* He reached out and swept her aside effortlessly. She crashed into the wall like a bundle of dry kindling. He put his hand on Norman's head, closed the fingers, smiling at the perfect fit. This was meant to be.

Then another hand, small brown fingers, closed over his and, to his amazement, pulled the hand way from Norman's skull. He pushed, the servos whined in strain, and those small fingers began to sink into the metal as his might sink into clay. He jerked his hand away. The girl stood next to him, studying him with dark, dispassionate eyes. She looked harmless enough.

Somebody tapped him on the shoulder with enough force that he felt it through the armor. He turned and looked into a face made of dull gray metal, a living statue. "Let me introduce myself," it said. "You can call me Peg." And then a metal fist struck the faceplate like a sledgehammer. He reeled back in shock, undamaged but shaken.

Then he raised his right hand, pointed at the statue girl, and fired his concussion cannon.

Skin slipped into the engineer's booth. The man looked up at him, eyes wide. The image inducer had been smashed back in the street fight. "You still on the air, *amigo*?"

The man nodded.

"Then don't touch that dial. But you might want to make yourself scarce before this gets ugly." Then he looked out into the studio. "Too late!"

He lassooed the man, chair and all, with his fingers, and pulled him down to the floor just as Husk blasted through the window and clear through the wall behind them. He looked down at the engineer, who was too stunned to even nod. But

he looked okay. "Head for the hills, my man. Got business to take care of."

He jumped through the shattered window of the booth. Through the glass he could see Synch coming up the hall, evidently having gotten the old lady and the rest of the staff to the elevator. Then he saw M flung through that same glass, and right into Synch.

He ducked behind the console, and spotted Norman cowering in the footwell underneath. "Good show," Skin said. "Action packed."

Something like a small machine gun fired, making a jagged line of holes in the wall behind him, and Skin realized that all his skin just made him a bigger target.

Paige hung by one hand, looking at the busy Chicago street six floors below. People were scattering, running from the falling glass and wreckage. *If I fall, I am going to be very angry. Assuming I survive.* Which was far from a foregone conclusion. "Peg" had blasted her through three walls and an outside window with little apparent damage, but she was uncertain as to the limitations of her powers, much less any particular transformation.

She pedaled her feet, looking for purchase below, and managed to get her other hand over the windowsill, glass crunching harmlessly under her metal fingers. Her brother always said, *Better the devil you know than the devil you don't.*

She pulled herself up through the window, clambered to her feet, and charged through the remains of the three offices she'd smashed. When she got back to Norman's studio, it looked like ground zero: walls, windows, everything smashed, only Norman's console in the middle of it relatively unharmed.

The team seemed to have pulled back, and she could see why, as Jono stood in what used to be the hall, building up for one of his blasts.

"Chamber, don't!" she yelled. "You cut loose up here, and you'll kill half of Chicago with broken glass alone!"

The raging energy that pulsed inside Jono seemed to pull back, but then a beam of force lashed out anyway, enveloping the shaggy monstrosity that stood in the middle of the studio, tearing at it like a hurricane. Pieces of it peeled off and flew away.

As the blast subsided, Paige saw that Jono had not used the full extent of his power, just enough to blast away the thing's disguise and reveal what was underneath. It was another of the armored tin men they'd battled on the street. But not like them. This one was much tougher.

Then she saw movement behind the console, saw Angelo emerge dragging Walt Norman across the floor, saw the tin man turning, raising his arms to fire at point-blank range.

"Chamber," she hissed, "we've got to distract him! Draw his fire!"

The Expatriate's plan was as much in ruins as Norman's studio. He didn't know if the mike was still live, but it wasn't important. The damage had been done the moment the real Peg had spoken. With his disguise ripped away, even that part of the pretense was over. Now there was nothing left but escape and revenge.

Even killing Norman would be merely an amusement. Everyone would indeed be talking about this show tomorrow, but they wouldn't be talking about the martyr Norman or his mutant killer. They'd be talking about a fool murdered by his own blind ambitions.

He'd salvage something out of this. Somehow, even without his communications network, he'd salvage his organization, or at least part of it. He'd rebuild. He'd go on. But first he had to kill these mutant brats for what they'd done to him.

Then he heard something move behind him. Norman? One of the kids? It didn't matter. Whatever it was, he would kill it. He powered the concussion cannon and the flamethrower, and turned.

The metal girl slammed into his side like a linebacker, throwing him off balance. She was heavy and tough, but not as strong as she looked. A minor obstacle at best. He righted himself and tossed her aside. Then another beam of force slammed into his back, sending him sprawling over the console.

A flare of annoyance shot through him. The boy was more of a threat. *Kill him first.* He turned, and decided to see how effective the constrictor device was on human flesh. He aimed at the boy, seeing his blasted face and chest. *I'm doing him a favor.* Then he fired.

• • •

Jono saw the tin man aim at him. It was too late to run, too late to duck, and there was no place to hide. His biokinetic blast was his only defense, and he instinctively let loose with all he had.

Then his world exploded, the blast feeding back on him, surrounding him, the only thing keeping him from being crushed by some invisible force. Energy boiled around him that would have destroyed any normal person, but it was the same energy that filled his shattered body, that was him.

But the outside force pushed against him, squeezing the energy in, crushing him from all sides at once.

Paige pulled herself up from the floor. The armored man had Jono trapped in some kind of beam. A field of energy surrounded Jono, and only his own biokinetic energy seemed to keep it at bay, forming an angry bubble with Jono trapped inside, like a fly in amber.

The Expatriate ignored the warning klaxons going off in his headset. Somehow the boy was resisting the constrictor device. He increased the power, even though the heat he could feel on his arm indicated that it was overloading. He had other weapons. Let this one burn out. As long as he stopped this opponent, there would be plenty of destruction left for the others.

Jono spun head over heels, suspended weightless in a pool of his own energy. He felt the field tighten, would have screamed in pain if he still could. He thought of the school, physics class, how a fusion reactor worked, plasma crushed to impossible heat and pressure inside a magnetic bottle. *Will I explode?*

If he had to, he would. He heard Paige call his name, and it filled him with a determination to survive. Ever since his power had first appeared he'd focused everything on keeping it in check, but there was no need for that now. With every force left in his body, he reached out against the crushing force and pushed.

• • •

"Feedback overload! Constrictor feedback overload!" The small mechanical voice screamed from the Expatriate's headphones. He didn't know what it meant, but he tried to cut off the device anyway. Redline indicators flashed all around his status display, but the constrictor wouldn't shut down.

"What—?"

Then there was a shriek of bending metal as the armor, every part of it, folded in on itself as though crushed by invisible pliers, folded in on the soft, pink thing trapped inside.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



RETHAL RETHAL

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt
me.

—children's rhyme



Jono landed on his knees, his hands spasmed painfully into fists. Then he realized that the crushing force was gone, and it was like being born a second time. "I'm alive!"

Paige rushed to his side, threw her arms around him, and he could see her metal hide peeling off in strips. The girl underneath was crying. Jono realized that he didn't have the strength left to do anything but fall over. He just wanted to sleep.

"Oh, man," said Angelo, struggling to release the headpiece on the shattered armor as Norman watched with horror, "this is really harsh."

The metal around the seam was bent, and even when he'd figured out the latches, he wasn't sure it was going to come free. He wrapped his skin into the seam to get a better grip on the edge, then threw his weight against it. There was a creak then a snap, and he and the headpiece went flying backward onto the floor.

The man inside was barely conscious. Blood trickled from his mouth and nose.

Norman stared wide eyed at the man, scrambled closer to him on his hands and knees. "Trent! For God's sake, why?"

The fallen man smiled, and it seemed to take most of the energy he had left in him. "Walt, you'll never know what you were worth to me dead."

Norman knelt next to him. "Trent . . ."

"Don't call me that. I am—the Expatriate." The man's eyes seemed to lose focus, and his head fell forward.

Somebody came stumbling through the smashed remains of the studio door, and Angelo looked up. It was an old woman, the one Synch had taken from the studio earlier. There was a bruise on her face, but she seemed unharmed. She fell down next to Norman, throwing her arms around him.

Behind her in the door, he could see Recall. And Sean. And Emma. "Uh-oh," he said. "Busted."

Jono felt his strength coming back. He seemed to hurt in parts that didn't exist anymore. With Paige's help, he managed to get to his feet. It would be a while before he was blasting anybody, though.

"He said he was the Expatriate," said Jono. "Never heard of him. What did he have against us?"

Norman looked up at him from the floor. "You killed him. He was my producer, and you killed him!"

The old woman frowned. "Walt, he tried to kill you. He would have if—"

"Murdering mutants is what they are! I was right about everything." He struggled to his feet, pushing away the woman, and grabbed his microphone like a lifeline. "Is this mike still live? I was right about everything!"

Jono had a bitter feeling of *déjà vu*.

Recall stepped up and took Paige's arm. "Come on, we've got to get out of here."

"Some radio appearance," she said. "Guess I showed him." Then she turned to follow Recall.

"Guess so," said Jono.

But Emma stepped up to the man, looked him straight in the eye.

A strange expression crossed his face, and he suddenly started tugging at his hair with both hands. "Get out of my brain, you freak!"

"You don't hate mutants," said Emma, "not any worse than you hate anyone else. You just tell people what they want to hear. You'd hate kittens if it would help your ratings."

Norman folded, turned his eyes away from her, from them all. "I'm an entertainer," he said, his voice low. "I never claimed to be anything else. It was never supposed to be real."

Emma glared at him. "Is this real enough for you?" She spun around and marched from the studio. The others were waiting outside. "Let's go," said Emma.

Recall looked in at Norman clutching his microphone. "No," he said. "You go on without me. He wants a mutant on his show, he's going to get one."

Paige grabbed his shoulder as he started to walk back. He shrugged her off. "Let me do this, Paige. It's what I do. It's what I was meant to do."

He walked back into the shattered studio and snatched the microphone from Norman's hand.

Jono wondered if Paige was going to stay, too, but instead she walked with the rest of them to the stairwell. The old woman was standing by the door when they got there, seem-

ingly uncertain if she should go in or not. As Jono walked past her, he felt her hand on his shoulder. He turned.

She tried to look at him, shying away from his face. "Thank you," she said, "for saving my son's life."

Paige followed the others as they walked through the empty building lobby. Emergency crews were pulling up outside, and they stood off to one side as firemen and police ran past to the elevators. If any of them thought to turn their way, Emma would undoubtedly take care of it. Behind the empty security guard's desk, a radio was turned on, and from it, she could hear Recall's voice.

"What you've just heard, if you can hear this at all, was a group of young mutants saving the life of a man they had every reason to hate. I'm one of them, but not one of them. I'm a mutant, and I hated this man too. But now I see that hate is wasted on him. He's empty. He's just words. And you can't hate the wind."

CHAPTER NINETEEN



NORMAN SHOW SHAKE-UP AFTER TERRORIST ATTACK

After the amazing on-air terrorist attack that shut down production for almost a week, *The Walt Norman Show* returns to the air with a new format, and a new cohost. Chicago college student and self-admitted mutant Scooter McCloud, who goes by the air name Recall, joins the show as new cohost to provide a counterpoint to Norman. The show's new producer, Susan Kris, reports that sketch work will take a backseat to serious talk in the new format. Also, in a new phone-in segment, Recall will attempt to use his mutant abilities to help callers find lost items. Says Recall, "This isn't a freak show for people's amusement. I just have a gift, and I want to use it to help people if I can."

—*Radio Trade Daily* Web Site item

Paige gave Chill, then Pound, a hug as they stood outside the Xabago.

"Recall would have been here if he could," said Chill.

Pound just blushed.

"I know," said Paige.

"You M.O.N.S.T.E.R.s are all right," said Angelo, slapping Chill on the arm. "You ever get to Massachusetts, you look us up. We'll be at Xavier's School, for sure." He turned to Jubilee. "When did Sean say our grounding ends?"

She shrugged. "Something about 'when the sun burns out,' I think."

Jono shook Chill's hand, then Pound's, then wordlessly climbed into the RV.

"Probably won't be much fun on the trip home," observed Chill.

Paige shrugged. "I think we've seen enough of America for one summer. If nothing happens the rest of the trip, I don't think any of us will mind. Grounding isn't such a bad thing."

Chill smiled. "You look out for the bunch of them, you hear? You and me, we're a lot alike in some ways. You just remember, you were just trying to do what's right, the best way you knew how."

She smiled as she climbed into the Xabago. "We all do."

Somewhere along Interstate 95 in rural North Carolina, a poorly rendered two-hundred-foot tall, reinforced-concrete statue of Dr. Doom loomed over the surrounding countryside. For fifty cents (tax not included), visitors could climb a spiral staircase (three hundred and eighty-five metal steps) up through his right leg to an observation platform inside his helmet, step up to a handrail just inside the mouth of his fearsome mask, and gaze out over miles of numbingly uninteresting marshland.

He stood guard over Little Latveria, a truck stop and tourist Mecca along the long, empty freeway that connects Florida with the great cities of the northeast. Doubtless the real Victor von Doom would have destroyed the entire facility in a fit of rage, if indeed he were aware of it, and perhaps the entire state of North Carolina, not entirely beneath his notice, merely a footnote on a deed to a property he planned to acquire some-

day, in the course of taking over the rest of the world.

But for now, all was peaceful below the feet of the armored giant, where sprouted a tasteless little village of souvenir shops, fireworks stands, eateries, T-shirt shops, and motels (the largest of them a one-half-scale replica of Castle Doom constructed entirely of cinder block), all tended by bored local teenagers dressed in simulated Latverian peasant garb.

The irony hadn't escaped Buford T. Hollis, the man better known as Razorback, as he'd pulled in to rent a room for the night, but he was exhausted from the day's drive, and the CB chatter reported that the softest beds and the best bacon waffles along the interstate were to be found at Little Latveria. His empty stomach and aching back (a high-school football injury come back to haunt him) had overcome his better nature.

Thus it was he who found himself in a tower room of the Motel Doom, convenient to the ice machine and the Snack-O-Matic, with a view of Doom's grim visage looking down over the parking lot. Through the checkered curtains he could see his custom semitruck, the Big Pig III, parked under a street-light, a small group of curiosity seekers gathered around to gawk.

If any of them had bothered to look up at the window, they wouldn't have seen Razorback, hero of the moment, only Buford T. Hollis, an Arkansas boy far from home. The clock radio on the table next to the bed showed 9:34 in glowing red numbers, and from its speaker, a young man's voice could be heard, a voice Buford had been listening to for a long time, a voice that wouldn't let him sleep, no matter how tired he was.

"Mutants are all around you, whether you know it or not. They're your neighbors, your friends, and the kid that bags your groceries at the supermarket. They don't hide because they want to, or to be secretive, they hide because they're afraid. They're afraid of you. Afraid to be the first one and draw attention to themselves. Afraid of what will happen if they do."

"Afraid of what, Recall?" said another voice from the radio, a man's voice. *"Afraid of me?"* He laughed. *"The big bad Norman scares the little mutants?"*

"You, and all the Normans. You write the paychecks, you buy the products, you give out the jobs, you enforce the laws. There are mutants out there, famous mutants, politicians,

movie stars, novelists, maybe even super heroes afraid to show themselves, afraid to lose the public's trust. No matter how powerful they may seem, they're weak against all of you out there listening. Maybe collectively they could change your minds, but each of them is alone, and nobody is brave enough to go first."

From a chair in the corner of the room, the Razorback cowl glared at Buford with accusatory glass eyes. All he'd ever wanted to do was help people, to defend the weak and to make a difference. But beyond that, he had to admit he had a personal agenda: to be liked. After years of fighting the good fight in obscurity, he'd finally achieved that.

Tomorrow he'd be in Washington, attending a reception at the White House. Taryn was flying in from Arkansas, where she'd been visiting her family, to meet him. The spotlight would be on him one more time, but he could feel it fading already. The national press was becoming bored, and in time he would probably just slide back into obscurity, a local curiosity and not much more.

In six months, nobody would care if he was a mutant, even if he shouted it from the barn top. In six months, the truth could do him no harm. In six months, the truth could do nobody any good.

From the radio, the announcer was giving the toll-free numbers and asking the listeners to call in. Buford considered the phone on the nightstand the way a hiker might consider a rattlesnake on the trail in front of him. He couldn't ignore it, and he couldn't go around. Either way, it was going to be a long night.

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